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FIRST OCTOBER NUMBER

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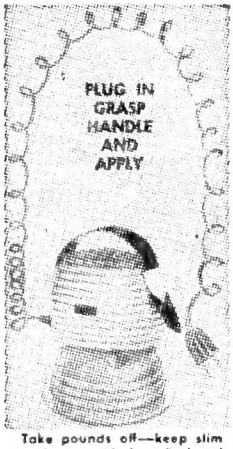

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST OCTOBER NUMBER

October 7, 1955
Volume 194, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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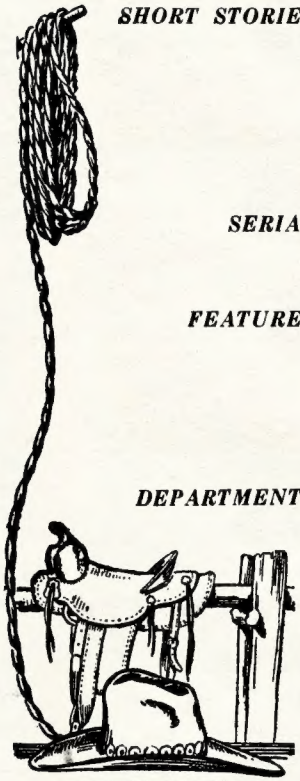

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Shy Bachelor

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for many years and like it very much. I want to hear from both sexes but would prefer to hear from girls around my own age. I am 37, I stand 5'11" tall, and weigh 210 lbs. I enjoy all sports especially fishing. I also enjoy movies very much. Please let me hear from anyone who cares to write. I will answer anything.

EARLE JEPSON

Box 176
Winterport, Maine

Long Brown Hair

Dear Editor:

I am an 18 year old girl, 5' 3" tall, 125 lbs. and have long brown hair and blue eyes. I enjoy roller skating, dancing, swimming and just about any sport there is. My hobbies are collecting stamps, snapshots and letters. I would like to write to boys and girls from all over the world especially Spain and Italy. I will answer all letters.

NANCY BOYER

Round Lake, Minnesota

New Friends Of All Ages

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy it very much. I would like to make new friends of all ages. I have brown hair and eyes, and am 5' 5" tall. I weigh 110 lbs, and my age is 14. My hobbies are reading, writing and receiving letters. I like swimming and other outdoor sports. I promise to answer all letters.

SHIRLEY BURTON

R.R. #1
Mt. Carmel, Ill.

Hunters & Fishers

Dear Editor:

Would you make room for three sisters who are eager to receive letters from all parts of the world? Boys and girls between 18 and 25 are especially welcome. Alice is 19, brown hair, hazel eyes, 5'3" likes hunting and fishing. LaVerne is 22, brown hair and eyes, 5'2", also fond of hunting and fishing. Mary is 18, brown hair and eyes, 5'3", likes all outdoor sports.

THE BURNS GIRLS

Box 118
Tyrone, New Mexico

Blue-green Eyes

Dear Editor:

I read every issue of RANCH ROMANCES I can get and I'd like to have my name in your Air Mail column. I am 17 years old, stand 5'6", have brown hair and blue-green eyes and weigh 138 lbs. My hobbies are movies, skating, music and collecting snapshots. I shall answer all letters from people everywhere. So come on fill my mailbox.

LOREN GARE

Rte. 1
Livington, Tennessee

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Blondie

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 11 years. I like to read RANCH ROMANCES very much. I will answer all letters I get from boys between 11 and 14. I stand 4' 11½", and weigh 83 lbs. I have blonde hair and blue eyes. I will trade snapshots with boys.

JACKIE MOORE

R#5
Atora, Oklahoma

2 Year Reader

Dear Editor:

I thought I would drop a line to you. I am very lonely, and would like to hear from your readers. I am 5' 3" tall and weigh 170 lbs. I have blue eyes and blond hair. I am 34 years old. I have been reading your magazine for 2 years. I think it is tops. So come one, come all please fill my mailbox.

HARRISON CUNNINGHAM

Box 5
Hallimett, Maine

Sweet Sixteen

Dear Editor:

I enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES very much. I'm 16 years old, 5' 2" tall, weigh 105 lbs., have short brown hair and big brown eyes. I'm interested in sports and music and writing letters. I'll exchange snapshots with anyone.

ROSIE COOPER

Route 3
Fredericktown, Mo.

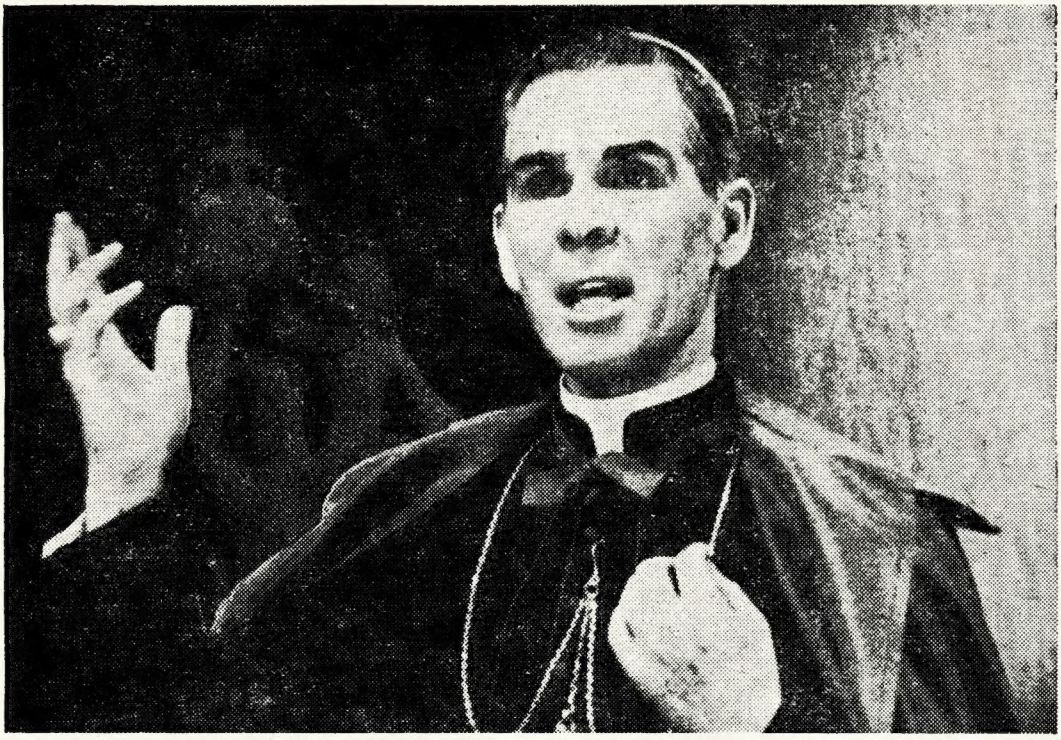
Pals Will Be Pals

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a long time and have read all the letters from pen pals. Now I want to be a pal to someone and have them be a pal to me. I am 48 years old, divorced and fond of many sports.

DOROTHY SCHWANKE

533 Prairie Ave.
Janesville, Wisconsin.



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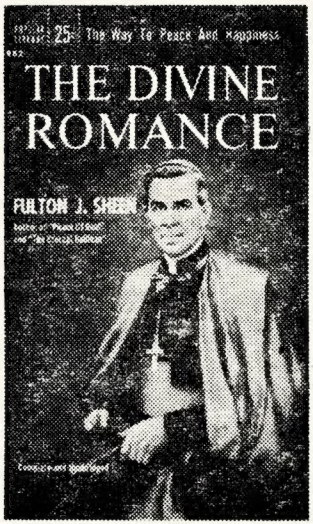

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

WHEN a Detroit, Mich., man walked into a police station to report the theft of a vacuum cleaner, the sergeant reached behind the desk and handed over the missing item. A thief had been caught with the vacuum not ten minutes before.

A SAN FRANCISCO, Calif., dog catcher was fined $25 for biting the policeman who tried to arrest him.

ONE of the most startled wallet snatchers of the year was probably the one who grabbed a billfold sticking out of a Columbus, O., man's pocket, and found that the wallet was chained to the man's trousers.

A JUDGE in Paoli, Ind., denied permission to Earl Wiley Bottomlee to change his name to Aearlygodlet Wileyelectronspirit Leegravity.

"SOMEBODY'S been tailing me clear from Los Angeles," a man told Vernon, Calif., police. There was indeed a car behind him, but it was empty. The driver had apparently locked bumpers with a parked car and had been hauling it behind him.

THE THIEF who stole a typewriter from the department of modern languages in a Jefferson City, Mo., college will need an interpreter. The typewriter prints in Czechoslovakian.

COLD weather was blamed when a sheriff in Goldfield, Nev., couldn't get his car started, though he pressed on the starter till the battery was almost dead. But when it finally occurred to him to check his gasoline tank, he found that thieves had drained it dry.

IT'S sometimes hard for parents to tell their twin children apart, it seems. For instance, the 22-month-old twins of a Los Angeles, Calif., couple both had their stomachs pumped because the befuddled parents didn't know which child had swallowed a moth ball.

SEEKING a painless way to get rid of his pet duck, a Madison, Ind., man offered it as the prize in a shooting match. The plan backfired; the man won.

A PASSING motorist reported seeing a service station being robbed, and a policeman rushed to the scene and found the attendant with his hands up. There was no robbery taking place, though; the attendant had bet that he could hold his hands straight up for 15 minutes, and was just trying to win the wager.

IN CHICAGO, Ill., a young man ate a big dinner in a restaurant, ordered four hamburger sandwiches to take home, then rushed out without paying. Caught and jailed, the man ate the sandwiches and then, happy and well fed, went peacefully to sleep.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

COUNT THREE AND PRAY

The wild and wooly South of the post-Civil War era provides the excitement and the authentic background in Columbia's new movie

WHEN IS A Western not a Western? When it's Columbia's new release, *Count Three and Pray,* according to Van Heflin. And Van ought to know. He's the star. He is also an expert on the subject, in my book. After all, didn't he star in one of the greatest of all the sagas of the West? *Shane,* of course.

Van calls *Count Three and Pray* a Western in disguise. Actually, all of the action takes place East of the Mississippi, and in the heart of Dixie, at that. But, except for a background of magnolia instead of sagebrush, you would think you were seeing life in a frontier town.

That's because the setting of the story is the desolate time right after the Civil War, when the South was pretty wild and wooly itself.

The Southerners then had a lot in common with the Western settlers and, except for fighting Indians, most of the same problems. They had just as big a job as the homesteaders did in building up the new territories. But in this case they were starting to build over again in the same place.

Even the plot has a Western tang. As Luke Fargo, Van finds he must win the right to settle among people who would like to see him run out of town on a rail. This antagonism isn't too surprising to Luke, because he has just come back from the war wearing the North's blue uniform, which is enough to guarantee anyone an unpopular reception. Luke runs into all the trouble he expects, and more.

His first dose comes from Lissy, a half-savage girl who is fond of taking pot shots at him. He finally succeeds in taming her so effectively that the wild gleam in her eye is replaced by a romantic one. Before he is through, he subdues a threatening mob with his fists, and defends his honor—successfully of course.

See what I mean? Luke's jobs in the movie are all the kind that would be everyday chores for any deputy sheriff in the old West.

Columbia was pretty sure it had another

hit on its hands well before they started shooting *Count Three and Pray*. The screenplay accidentally got into circulation before the casting was completed. The story was such a good one, and the leads were such plums, that before long top stars were clamoring for the parts. A few even offered to take cuts in salary to get them. The way producer Ted Richmond figured it, if the audiences like the picture as well as the actors did, *Count Three and Pray* can't miss.

Van has the kind of a record that made him a top contender for the lead all along—at full salary, too. All but two of his pictures have been successful. He just doesn't know how to make a bad one.

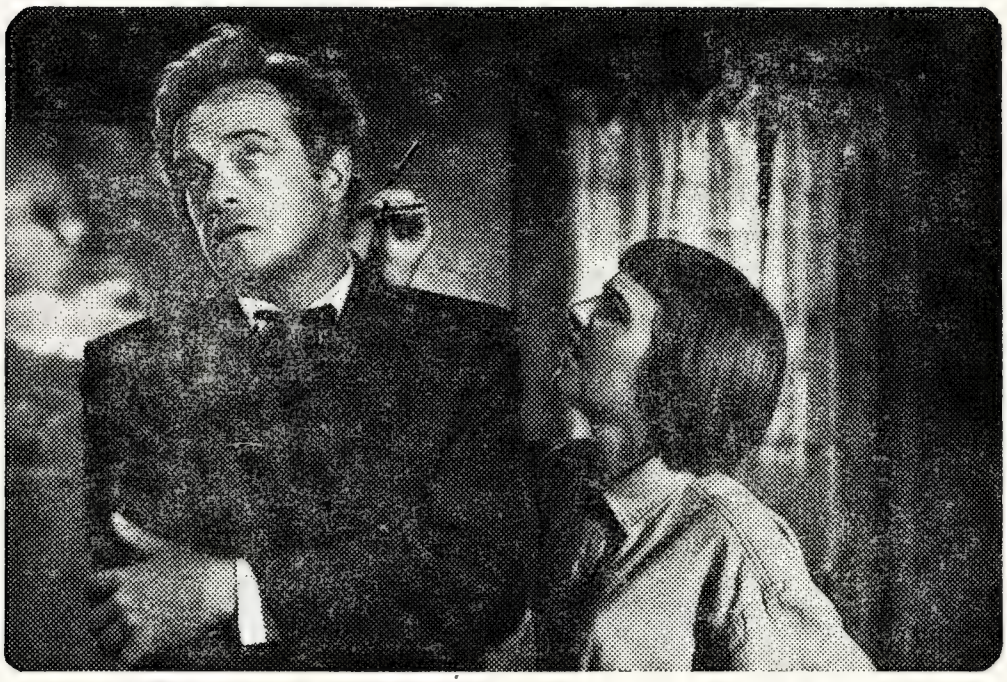
Joanne Woodward left her New York television career to make her screen debut as Lissy. Off the screen, Joanne is of course a very civilized young lady. But she does have a vivacious personality that is perfect for the part of the little semi-savage.

Joanne is also a girl of action. The make-up people discovered it first when they tackled the problem of her hair. The Woodward locks were too long and beautiful to turn into the unkempt tangle called for in the part. Tucking them under a properly messy wig seemed to be the only answer, until Joanne took over with the shears. In four snips she gave herself the desired jagged hair-do, and every one was delighted. It looked terrible!

Van was pretty impressed with Joanne's quick mind, too. In fact he was so impressed that he insisted on reducing his own lines to make her part fatter. Although I don't believe him, Van tells me that generosity wasn't his motive.

"A bigger part for Joanne made a better picture," he said. "And a better picture benefits everybody. So you see, I was being strictly selfish!"

Raymond Burr is right at home as the heavy in *Count Three and Pray,* but he's not too happy about it. Ray's last role was the "butcher" in *Rear Window,* and he has a hankering to play a nice guy for a change. But with his skill, he probably won't get the chance. It takes a lot of acting talent to be tough!



Van Heflin gets a close shave from tomboy Joanne Woodward

VAN HEFLIN

Success Came Easy

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE ACCLAIM that Van Heflin won when he went Western in *Shane* was just another piece in Van's success pattern. It started back in the 30's, on Broadway, with the lead in *Philadelphia Story.* That rocketed him to the top. Pictures like *Shane* and *Count Three and Pray,* his latest, have kept him there.

The road to stardom has been particularly short and smooth for Van. This is actually a bit of irony, because for a long time Van could take acting or leave it alone. He admits that he had no life-long ambition to become a great star, or even a bit player, for that matter. Not that Van had anything against acting. He was just too busy being a sailor to have time to be interested in anything else.

Van was a product of the oceanless Middle West—Oklahoma, to be exact. When his family moved to Long Beach, California, Van was thirteen—an impressionable age. The thing that impressed Van most was the mighty Pacific. He had to be in it, on it or talking about it constantly, a state of affairs his family soon found pretty boring.

So after living with a land-locked sailor for two years, his parents gave in to Van's pleadings and agreed to let him ship out on a fishing schooner to Mexico for the summer. This gave the elder Heflins a few months' peace, and Van a good set of sea legs. He limbered them up every summer after that, with trips to South America and Honolulu, until he graduated from high school.

According to Van, the next few years went something like this.

"Got talked into college. Stuck it out for two years, which was all the dry land I could take. Back to sea on a coastwise cargo boat bound for New York. Met a Broadway producer in the city. Got talked into a part in a play he was doing. Show flopped, but who cared? Shipped out on a tramp steamer for the South Seas, and got used to that steady pay again."

Evidentally Van did care, though, because before long he was back on land again, this time for good. Then things really moved into high gear. He disposed of the two years of college he had left, in one year, breezed through the Yale School of Dramatics, and did a little groundwork in stock. In no time he found himself on Broadway, with his name in lights.

"I used to stand out in front of the theatre looking at 'Van Heflin' spelled out up there, and pinch myself," Van told me. "For a guy who thought a third mate's ticket was all I wanted out of life, I was doing all right."

Then Hollywood beckoned. So Van went West, and promptly walked off with an Oscar for his role in *Johnny Eager.* He endeared himself to producers by making pictures that almost never fail to make money. And there just isn't a better guaranty of a long and happy career than that.

Pretty Frances Neal gave up her own movie career when she married Van thirteen years ago. But she hasn't regretted it a minute. Vanna, Cathy and baby Tracy Heflin are her three good reasons why. And, too, Frances thinks that a spotlight on one member of the family is plenty.

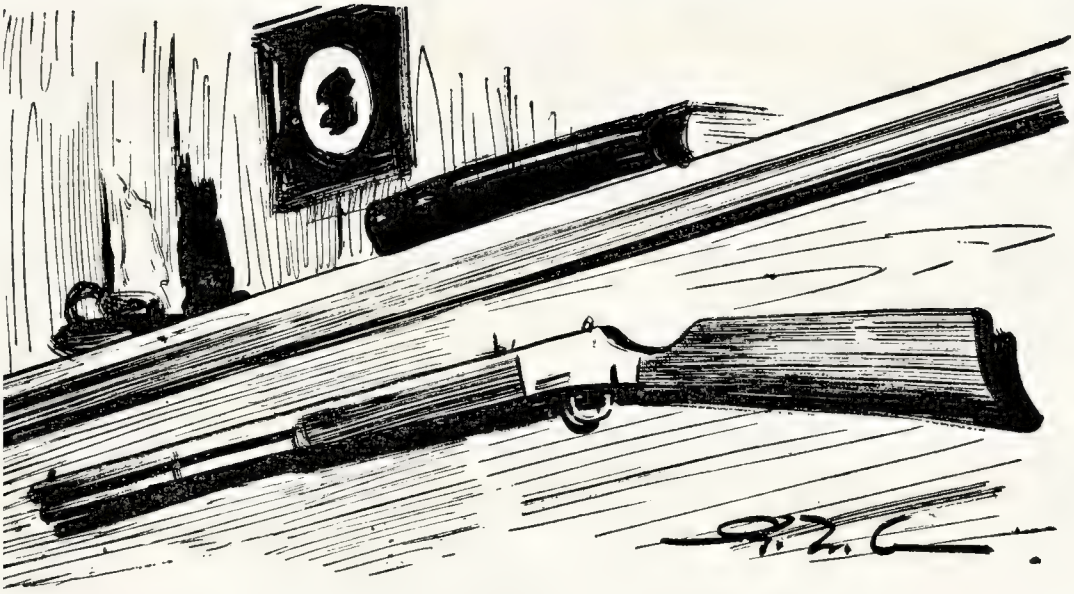
Van divides his time now between the stage and the screen. What time he has left for relaxation he spends at home with his family, or trout fishing, when he can work a weekend into his busy schedule.

As far as Van's "other life" goes, he seldom gives the sea a thought now. He knows precisely when he stopped being a sailor and became an actor. It was when he took a part in his first play. The title? *Sailor Beware.*

Columbia

Van wasn't particularly interested in acting, when he started

Two Notches



CHUCK FINLEY WAS caught in a neat frame-up . . . and every step he took to clear himself just added to the evidence of his guilt

CHUCK FINLEY, not so long ago a rider on the payroll of the Flying W spread, was feeding chopped straw into the mud hopper where the jailhouse gang was turning out adobe bricks. Bad Luck Babcock, the old jailer, emerged from the sheriff's office and started hobbling in the direction of the work gang.

All work around the brick yard promptly stopped. Orin Gaylord and Steve Robbins, two Lazy L hands who had drawn a week each in the pokey for shooting up the backbar mirror in Tony's Saloon, left off pouring liquid

On His Gun

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

'dobe into the brick molds. Hobo Joe, a bindle stiff who had been yanked off a box-car and sentenced to sixty days for vagrancy, stopped bucketing water into the mixing trough. He summed up aloud what the three others were thinking.

"Well, here comes trouble for somebody, boys."

Bad Luck Babcock was a humpbacked old coot on the sunset side of seventy, who had lost a leg during the siege of Vera Cruz while serving as a drummer boy. All he had to show for it was a medal and a wooden leg. Somehow or other, though, he had wangled a night guard's job at the county jail here in Badwater. During the day he ran errands for Sheriff Lex Colter.

No one knew his real first name, but for years prisoners had called him Bad Luck, because nine times out of ten when the sheriff sent the old fellow out of the office it boded ill for somebody.

Finley thought bitterly, it can't be me. I've had all the bad luck that could be dished out to one man. Then he warned himself, If I'm not careful I'll turn as sour as Babcock is, blaming the world for my troubles.

Chuck Finley felt his heart pounding as he watched the old jailer thumping toward them, along the rows of sun-baked bricks stacked up like cordwood. Sheriff Colter already had enough 'dobe blocks stockpiled to run a six-foot fence around Texas, but production never shut down if he had a prisoner on the books. Keep the hardcases busy, Colter always said, and they won't be thinking up ways to break jail.

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OLD BAD LUCK'S raucous shout reached them as he approached. "Finley! Chuck Finley! Sheriff wants to see you in the front office!"

Finley swatted his hands together over the hopper, knocking off the particles of chopped straw they used for reinforcing the adobe bricks. He knew well enough that Bad Luck wasn't bringing him word that his sentence was up. The cowtown judge who had sentenced him had turned him over to Sheriff Colter to serve a minimum sentence of six months on a cattle-rustling charge, and he had served only six weeks.

As Chuck climbed down off the mud hopper he was aware that the Lazy L hands were scowling. They had had a lot of fun rawhiding him here in the prison yard, since Chuck was serving time for stealing Lazy L beef.

"If you two saddle bums see Bee Gorum before I do," Chuck flung as a final jab at the two cowhands, "tell him I'll be around in due time to take up the rustling deal he used to railroad me. And the same goes for Colonel Slankard."

Orin Gaylord, who was the Lazy L blacksmith, leaned on his shovel handle and chuckled sarcastically. "Next time you take a notion to throw a crooked loop," he drawled, "don't pick out a Lazy L steer. Next time you won't live long enough to get a cozy job making mud bricks."

Without answering, Chuck stalked grimly down an alley between towering piles of adobe blocks, following the jailer back toward the sheriff's office. Chuck was a strapping six-footer without benefit of spike-heeled Justins and flat-crowned Stetson, and he had just spent his tweny-fourth birthday behind Sheriff Lex Colter's jail bars. That birthday business was a sore spot with Finley.

There were worn places on the sides of his levi pants legs where tied-down holsters had rubbed the denim, guns which now reposed in the lawman's locker. He felt undressed without them, but if his sentence ran the limit he wouldn't be feeling the raspy surface of a gun-hammer under his thumb for quite a while.

He overtook Bad Luck at the far end of the brickyard. The old man was hobbling along at a brisk clip, his tarnished Vera Cruz medal clinking on a shirt button. He wore a grin under his ragged dragoon mustache, the sadistic grin he always wore when he was delivering bad news to some helpless prisoner.

"What's the deal I draw on this shuffle, Bad Luck?" Chuck demanded sourly. "Road gang? County rock quarry?"

Bad Luck shrugged. "Sheriff wants to see you, that's all I can tell you. The Romaine gal's in there arguing with him, and she isn't alone."

Chuck's heart stopped dead in his chest for a second. What would Jean Romaine be doing inside, talking with the sheriff? What

would she be doing in town at all, with the Flying W calf gather going on out in the Yellow Hills this week? She had to take care of the routine chores around the home spread when the crew was out—such as watering the milk cows and feeding the chickens. It was a long trip from the Flying W to Badwater, too. Twenty miles, half a day's ride.

"Who's with her?" Chuck asked, as they neared the rock wall of the jailhouse. "Her old man?"

Bad Luck's eyes flashed malevolently. "Old friend of yours, fellow," he growled. "Bee Gorum."

Chuck Finley's weather-browned face lost color. Bee Gorum, ramrod of the big Lazy L outfit! The dirty son who had railroaded him into a courtroom, charged with murder! Bee Gorum, who was his rival for the heart and hand of Chuck's boss's daughter out on the Flying W! Who could say what Gorum had done to damage him with Jean during the six weeks Chuck had been mixing mud pies in the jail yard?

CHUCK outstripped the hobbling jailer and raced up the steps leading to the side door of the sheriff's office. It was locked. He hammered the weather-beaten panels angrily with a clenched fist.

From inside the office he heard Sheriff Colter say, "That'll be Chuck now. You'll oblige me by stepping outside, ma'am."

A choking sensation swelled up in Chuck's throat as he heard Jean's voice answer. "All right. I understand."

Chuck heard the street door slam. But he didn't see Jean come out on the porch. A high wall prevented that. He wondered if Bee Gorum were waiting for her on the front porch.

A bolt was slid from its socket, and the office door was opened. Then Chuck Finley's eyes were meeting the cold blue ones of Lex Colter, who had been sheriff of Coyotero County since before Chuck was born. A tin star glittered on one of Colter's gallus straps. A corncob pipe was jutting from his mouth.

"Come in, Finley," he said. "Bad Luck, hike over to Tony's and fetch me a bucket of beer. I got a thirst."

Chuck's eyes darted to the street door as he stepped into the two-by-four office, but Jean had closed the door behind her. He thought, the sheriff must be sending me to the quarry. Maybe Jean heard about it and rode into town to tell me good-by.

Sheriff Colter closed and bolted the side door and walked over to the swivel chair beside his cluttered rolltop desk. He sat down and began to pack his pipe with fine-cut burley, an abstract expression settling on his craggy face. Like a judge preparing to deliver a death sentence. Chuck thought to himself.

When the sheriff did not immediately break the silence, Chuck let his eyes roam around the room. The walls were papered with faded reward dodgers. Then he recognized his own bone-handled Colts and shell belts hanging on pegs inside an iron-barred gun cabinet, with red cardboard identification tags on them.

"All right, Sheriff," he finally snapped when the silence continued to be drawn out, "get on with it. When do I leave for the rockpile?"

Lex Colter did not speak until he got his corncob drawing to his satisfaction, a time-consuming operation. "No quarry detail for you, young fellow," he said at last. "It's closed down in hot weather. Later on, maybe. That depends on you."

A quick hope leaped in Finley, sending the blood rioting through his veins. For he knew the only alternative labor assignment the sheriff was empowered to mete out in Coyotero County was on a road-grading job back in the hills. That meant wearing a twenty-pound Oregon boot on one ankle, but road work sometimes gave a man a chance to make a break for freedom. It had been done, more than once.

Colter fished in a desk drawer and came up with a legal paper.

"I have a release order here, signed by Judge Coebalt," he said. "Probation's been granted in your case. To my mind that's a great miscarriage of justice, but since the judge roosts higher on the totem pole than I do, I have to turn you loose."

Chuck's jaw sagged. "You mean I'm free?" he blurted. "The Lazy L has dropped those rustler charges?"

The swivel chair groaned under Colter's

weight as he spun it around to face his prisoner.

"You aren't free," he growled. "I'm remanding you to the custody of Miss Jean Romaine until such time as the fall work's done on the Flying W. Then you come back to serve time where you leave off today."

Disappointment cut deep. Released to Jean's custody! That didn't set right. It would mean being honor bound not to get to work squaring his account with the Lazy L. A man on probation wouldn't be free to go gunning for the two men who had tried to pin a murder charge on him—Bee Gorum, and the owner of the Lazy L, Colonel Slankard.

Those polecats had almost made the charge stick, too. Only because the slug that had been dug out of a dead man's back didn't match the caliber of Finley's gun had he been saved from the gallows, six weeks back. He had a friendly coroner's hunch to thank for that. He hadn't been able to beat the rustling charge, though. He had drawn a six-months-to-five-years jail term for grand larceny, just short by one day of a sentence that would have made it mandatory for him to be shipped off to the state penitentiary.

"So Judge Coebalt finally got around to realizing I was innocent," he mumbled.

The sheriff shook his head. "Not so fast. The fact is that the Flying W needs you for the fall beef gather. Jean's old man is pretty important in the county, and he pulled strings, pleading hardship. But as I told you, when the Flying W roundup is over you'll report back here to finish your sentence, with no credit for time you'll be on the loose. And if you try to leave the country, you'll draw twenty years! Anyway you won't get far, and don't think you will!"

Hot anger filled Chuck. Nothing was really settled, then. He had been acquitted of murder in that running gunfight over in Talus Canyon, in which a Lazy L rider named Pete Collier had died with a bullet in his back. But, so far as the law was concerned, Chuck Finley was still a criminal, a convicted cattle thief, out on parole.

Sheriff Colter got out of his swivel chair and waddled over to his office safe. Opening it, he drew out a canvas bag, dumped the

contents on his desk, and compared them with the list he had made of Chuck's personal effects when they were impounded the day after the trial. The little heap consisted of a stock knife, five dollars in currency and loose change, a pocket compass, a gold nugget, a dollar watch, and a Comanche arrowhead.

"Here are your belongings," Colter grunted. "Sign this receipt and they're yours."

When Chuck had reclaimed his meager possessions he accepted the pen Colter handed him, his eyes scanning the check list Colter wanted him to sign.

"Hold on," he said suddenly. "Am I going to get my gun harness and guns?"

Colter pulled in a heavy breath. "The judge says its all right to return your guns, since that back country's swarming with Mexican renegades and men on the dodge."

"And Lazy L bushwhackers who'll be making a try at using my back for a target, Sheriff," Chuck finished for him.

Colter unlocked his gun cabinet and came back with Chuck's double cartridge belts and holstered .45s.

"Before you buckle on the artillery," he said before he passed over the guns, "I have a little sermon to preach, son. Like the judge said, I might as well give you back your guns, because old man Romaine won't let you ride out on roundup in that wild country without being armed, anyhow. But a lot of responsibility is tied up in these weapons, son. I hope you realize that."

Chuck snatched the Colt harness from the sheriff and cinched the belts over his flat belly. It felt good to be snugging down those matched Army Colts again.

"There'll come a time, Sheriff," he said hoarsely, "when my stretch will be behind me. Then I'll be carving a pair of notches on my guns. I'm not forgetting how I stood up in open court and heard two men try to pin a cold-blooded drygulch murder on me!"

Colter's eyes clouded. "You can count yourself lucky, son, that Judge Coebalt isn't here to listen to that kind of talk. He'd cancel the probation orders in a hurry."

Chuck didn't answer that. In moody silence he completed the job of tying down his holsters. It was an unexpected miracle, getting his guns back along with his temporary freedom.

"You've just the same as threatened to take the lives of Bee Gorum and Colonel Slankard, Chuck," the sheriff went on grimly. "Now I'm telling you this. If either of that pair are found dead in the next few weeks, if either Gorum or Slankard report that they've been shot at from the brush, I'm hauling you in. Then I'll latch my wrist irons on you for keeps."

Chuck said tautly, "That concludes the going-away sermon, Sheriff?"

Colter jerked a thumb toward the open door leading to the bullpen. "Get your shaving tools and other stuff from the cell. Miss Jean's waiting for you outside. Under the judge's order you'll have to swear an oath, before you leave here, to watch yourself while you're in the custody of the Flying W. That's all."

CHUCK FINLEY headed back to his cell and threw his possessions into a small bag. He did not feel a great sense of relief. This iron-barred cage would be waiting for him again when the Flying W roundup was finished and Romaine's beef was in the shipping pens in Badwater. Invisible strings were attached to his freedom, strings which included a sworn statement to the girl he loved. He couldn't let Jean down.

When he went back into the sheriff's office, Jean was there. Colter had called her in from the porch. Chuck's heart leaped, just at the chance to look at her again. No other girl in the world could match with Romaine's daughter.

Jean was just past her twentieth birthday. She and Chuck had grown up together on the Flying W. Chuck had loved her since her pigtail days, but somehow had never gotten around to letting her know about it. He kind of thought, though, maybe she just took it for granted.

"Chuck!" she cried eagerly, when she caught sight of him. "Oh, Chuck, it's so good to see you!"

She held out a sun-bronzed hand, and a pleasant feeling went through the cowboy as he gripped it. He was looking at her—red-headed, like her father, with a little button

of a nose set between the bluest eyes a man ever looked into. Having just ridden in from the Flying W this morning, she was wearing a man's shirt, levis, battered cowboots, and a flop-brimmed Texas hat. But no man's duds could conceal the voluptuous curves of her hips and bosom. In Chuck Finley's eyes, she couldn't have looked more beautiful decked out in silk and lace.

"It'll be nice seeing the range again, Jean," he told her. "Seems as if I've been baking mud bricks for an age." He turned to the lawman. "Well, Sheriff, reckon we'll leave now. See you this fall."

Colter held up a hand. "Not so fast. You have to swear on this Bible here—" he produced a battered black book as he spoke—"that during the time you're out of my custody you won't step outside the law, and that you're honor bound to report back to this office as soon as you get through with what you're temporarily wanted for on Flying W range."

"Not a step outside the law," Finley repeated bitterly. "All right, Sheriff. You hold the aces."

He placed a rope-calloused palm on the Bible, lifted his right hand, and mumbled, "I so swear. You have nothing to worry about, Sheriff. I won't leave the country as long as I'm wearing a rustler's brand."

Colter shook his head dubiously and gestured toward the street door. "All right, Miss Jean. He's all yours. I don't approve, but the judge outranks me."

Jean Romaine shook hands with the sheriff and said confidently, "The judge wouldn't have signed those papers if he hadn't believed there was a reasonable doubt that Chuck had nothing to do with that raid in Talus Canyon, Sheriff. Good-by."

Some of the tension left Chuck Finley as he stepped out into the cool shade of the jailhouse porch, with Jean's slim arm linked through his.

His own Flying W pony, a leggy grulla gelding, was hitched to Colter's rack in front of the jail. Jean must have gotten his horse and saddle and bridle out of the county's impound barn this morning. Her own line-back coyote dun was hitched alongside Chuck's.

THERE was one other horse at the jail rack—a big black wearing the Lazy L brand. Chuck felt his hackles stiffen as he recalled what Bad Luck had told him out in the jail yard. He felt Jean's hand tighten convulsively on his arm. "Bee rode in with me this morning, Chuck," she told him. "I couldn't help it. He overtook me on the road this side of the Tanks."

Chuck swung around to stare down into the girl's eyes. "Has Bee been bothering you while I've been in jail, Jean?"

Something like desperation came into Jean's eyes. "Please, Chuck!" she begged. "Bee's picking up supplies here in town now, and calling for his mail. If you want to, we can ride out without him."

Chuck's jaws tightened. "I asked you if he's been hanging around, making a fool of himself while I've been away."

Jean suddenly withdrew her arm from his. "Bee Gorum is always welcome on the Flying W," she reminded him coolly, "if that's what you're trying to ask, Chuck. After all, we're not feuding with the Lazy L, and Bee has always been friendly. Of course he's dropped in now and then since the trial."

Chuck felt his throat muscles constrict. His eyes raked the row of false fronts along Badwater's wide main street, searching for a glimpse of Gorum's swaggering figure. But he saw no sign of the Lazy L foreman.

"I didn't reckon he'd be so welcome around the home ranch," he finally said in a hurt tone, "after standing up before a jury and swearing it was my gun that dropped old Pete Collier."

Despair showed on the girl's face. "Please, Chuck," she begged again, "let's not talk about it. You were found innocent of that killing. Put yourself in the Lazy L's place. Somebody shot Colonel Slankard's cavvy wrangler that night. He and Bee Gorum flushed you out of the rocks where the murder shot came from."

Anger made Chuck Finley reckless. "You mean they said that's where the shot came from—a rifle slug, forty-five-seventy, not the thirty-thirty carbine I was carrying. You know damn well, Jean, I was camped over on my Circle F graze in the Yellow Hills that night when I heard cattle stampeding

over the next ridge. I rode over to see what was going on, and the next thing I knew I was right in the middle of a gunfight with those Mexicans who made off with that jag of Circle F and Flying W feeders."

"A mixed herd, Chuck," Jean cut in sharply, "including Lazy L beef. Those rustlers got away with more of the colonel's steers than they did with yours and ours put together."

Chuck Finley grunted belligerently, "I still say, like I said in court, the Lazy L pulled off that raid hoping to pin it on me! They knew I was camped across the ridge. Slankard and Gorum are after my graze, and they know the only way they can get hold of it is by killing me. Only they couldn't gun me down without drawing too much suspicion to the Lazy L. So they rigged up a fake rustling raid with Mexicans from across the Border."

The door of the sheriff's office opened behind them and Lex Colter stepped out onto the porch. The lawman said, "I think I've been hearing enough to know it isn't safe for Chuck to be let loose, even if he did swear an oath to behave himself, Miss Jean. I'm arresting him again on my own judgment."

Jean flung herself between Chuck and the sheriff. "No, please! The judge signed that release order, Sheriff. The responsibility isn't yours. And now with Judge Coebalt out on his circuit, I can't appeal to him for another six weeks!"

COLTER pulled in a hard breath, glaring at Chuck across Jean's shoulder.

"All right," he said. "But get out of earshot of my office with your blabbing and accusing, before I come to my senses and send you back to the brickyard, Chuck."

Chuck Finley, without answering, headed down the steps toward the waiting horses.

Jean called to him, "I have to run over to the postoffice and pick up the mail, Chuck. I'll be back in five minutes. Then we'll start home."

Chuck nodded morosely. "I'll go over to Fishman's Mercantile and pick up some smoking tobacco and cartridges," he said. "See you here in five minutes, Jean."

Jean touched his arm hesitantly. "If you run into Bee Gorum," she said, in a frightened tone, "don't argue with him. He might want to ride back with us as far as the Lazy L fork."

Chuck said carelessly, "It's all right with me if you and Gorum want to ride alone. Three's a crowd. You're making it pretty damn plain I'm the odd man."

Jean's eyes glistened with sudden tears. "Please, Chuck, don't be that way! You're talking like a jealous kid."

They separated then, perilously close to their first quarrel. Chuck was seething as he stalked across the street. Jealous, was he? By hell, maybe he was! Gorum bragged enough about how he aimed to marry Gifford Romaine's daughter some day. And there was no getting around it, Bee Gorum was a handsome man, the kind of guy that always got women.

Chuck told himself furiously, that's one reason Bee was so determined to railroad me to a hangrope—so he could take over my girl!

He crossed the street and entered the cool shadows of Moe Fishman's General Store. Moe was going over his books in the rear of the cluttered room when Chuck walked over to the tobacco counter. He had helped himself to half a dozen sacks of Durham when the storekeeper looked up and saw him.

"Chuck Finley!" Fishman blurted. "You out already?"

Finley said, "I need a box of forty-five shells. Hurry it up."

Fishman said, "Sure, Chuck. No offense intended."

Finley was stuffing the tobacco in the hip pocket of his levis when he heard a spur jingle to his left. A man's voice reached him, low-pitched and sibilant.

"I'd think twice before I sold this jailbird ammunition, Moe. He killed once. He might kill again."

Finley jerked around. Bee Gorum was standing beside the harness rack, idly rolling a cigarette, his lips twisted in a taunting smile.

GORUM was a big man, outweighing and outreaching the Flying W puncher. Crowding thirty, Gorum had crisp, wavy brown hair and a carefully trimmed mustache that gave him a certain air of charm and dash. Even on the range he

dressed flashily, in a yellow rodeo shirt, bullhide chaps with Mexican silver coins for tie conches, and expensive boots.

Chuck stalked up toward Bee Gorum. On the opposite side of the counter, Moe Fishman had frozen just as he was taking down a box of .45-caliber ammunition from a shelf.

The storekeeper whined plaintively, "No trouble, now, boys. If you're going to cause trouble, Chuck, wait till you're out of my establishment."

Chuck halted at arm's length from Gorum, who was packing a pair of fancy staghorn-butted sixguns, slung for crossdraw, at his flanks. He went on twisting his cigarette, his eyes taunting Chuck.

"You called me a jailbird, Bee?" Chuck challenged. "You called me a killer?"

Gorum shrugged. "It goes without saying you're carrying the smell of Colter's cell block on you, hombre. As for being a killer, how much did you pay the coroner to switch slugs after he dug one out of Pete Collier?"

Obviously Bee Gorum was baiting Chuck into a gun draw. Chuck knew he would be rusty, after six weeks without access to his weapons. Suddenly Gorum's hands dropped, brushing his gun butts, and in that instant Chuck Finley let fly a looping right uppercut. It caught Gorum on the point of the jaw with a sodden, meaty impact which drew a shriek of terror from the storekeeper behind the counter.

Gorum went down, his back and shoulders slamming into a cracker barrel and skidding it along the floor. A thread of blood leaked from a gash in his chin as he rolled over on one elbow and clawed dazedly for a sixgun.

Chuck had been expecting that. He lashed out with a boot toe, smashing Gorum's wrist and knocking the gun a dozen feet down the store.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Moe Fishman shrieked. "No fighting in the store!"

Chuck reached down, jerked Gorum's second Colt from leather, and tossed it on the counter. Then, grabbing a double fistful of Gorum's fancy silk shirt, he hauled the Lazy L ramrod to his feet.

Gorum saw the haymaker coming and tried to roll away from it. But Chuck Finley's rock-hard knuckles connected with the ramrod's nose and rocked his head back, blood flying.

Crashing backward into a harness rack, Gorum went down with a tangle of tugstraps and hames and bellybands cascading over him. Breathing hard, Chuck swung around.

Moe Fishman was bolting through an open section of his counter, screeching at the top of his lungs, "Sheriff! Sheriff!"

LEAPING sideward, Chuck Finley threw out a leg to trip the storekeeper. For a moment he had forgotten the seriousness of his situation, things had happened so fast. Now it came to him that if Fishman reached Lex Colter to tell the sheriff of a brawl between Chuck Finley and Bee Gorum, it would mean the clink sure for one Flying W hand, and with no chance of getting out again.

Hurriedly helping the storekeeper to his feet, Chuck panted, "Dump a bucket of water on Gorum's face, Moe. When he comes to, tell him the next time we cross trails I'll give him a chance to use those forty-fives of his."

Snatching up the box of ammunition Fishman had left on the counter, Chuck slapped down what cash he had in his pockets, and stalked grimly to the door. Halting there, he turned back to face Moe Fishman, who seemed glued to his tarcks, staring down at the unconscious Bee Gorum.

"You're a fair man, Fishman. When you tell Lex Colter about this hoorawing, be sure you tell him Gorum baited me into the ruckus. How would you like to be called a killer, Moe?"

Thembling from the nervous reaction of his brief set-to with the Lazy L ramrod, Chuck Finley stalked through the swinging doors and down the porch steps. Across the street, Jean Romaine was stuffing mail into one of her saddle-bags.

He composed himself with an effort, hoping his face would show nothing that could make Jean catch on that anything had happened. But she merely gave him a casual glance, as he reached his horse and swung into saddle. Then the two of them were curveting their horses out into mid-street.

Jean looked up and down the street, obviously searching for sight of someone. Chuck could guess who that was.

"I ran across Bee in the Mercantile, Jean," he said in clipped accents. "He won't be riding out for a little while. If you want to wait for him, it's all right with me."

Jean shook her head. "I've made no promise to wait for him, Chuck. Let's ride."

Westering sunlight was sending long shadows across the sage-dotted valley where the Flying W spread sprawled, when Jean and Chuck rode in from town.

Only once during the five-hour, twenty-mile horseback ride, had Chuck attempted to strike up a conversation. Jean had discouraged talk, apparently completely locked up in her own thoughts. Chuck had been unable to catch her interest at all.

That one time he had tried he had said, "Getting my little herd rustled this spring is going to set back my plans a couple of years, Jean. But I'll restock my Circle F and be ready to move into my own ranch house before you know it. I guess you know what I'm driving at, don't you, Jean?"

He had spurred his grulla closer to her stirrup. Although never before, in so many words, had he told Jean Romaine that he loved her and wanted her to be his wife, he tried to now, desperately.

But finding her aloof and uncommunicative for the first time in their lives together, he had a frightening hunch that maybe he had let the time for romance slip by. Maybe Bee Gorum had offered her something better than a two-bit ranch up in the Yellow Hills, the little spread Finley had bought from Jean's father three years before.

"Jean, listen to me," he had pleaded. "All my plans center around you."

But she had only spurred into a trot, turning her head to say, "Please, Chuck! I just don't feel like talking now."

And so they had ridden the rest of the way to the Flying W like a couple of strangers.

The ranch was deserted, as Chuck had known it would be. Old Giff, Jean's father, would be in the North part of the graze with his crew, branding calves on the Flying W's Government-leased graze.

As they turned their horses into the remuda corral, Jean said wearily, "If you'll slop the pigs and feed the other stock, I'll whip up supper for you, Chuck. Dad expects you at the roundup camp before daylight."

CHUCK turned from swinging his saddle to the top rail. "I'm supposed to make a night ride out to join the crew?"

Jean's eyes met his without changing expression.

"I'm alone here, Chuck."

He got what she was driving at, then. He glanced beyond the barns to the bunkhouse, a good fifty yards from the ranch house.

"So what?" he demanded. "It won't be the first time you and I have spent the night here, with the others away."

Jean turned away. "Dad's expecting you at the camp before sunup tomorrow, Chuck. Don't argue about it now."

He went about doing the routine chores in a glowering mood. So Jean was getting uppity, was she, rubbing his nose in what folks might or might not think or say? So it would be a scandal if he slept all night in the bunkhouse, while she slept in the big house?

And then the thought came to him suddenly, maybe she's expecting a caller!

Resent the thought as he might, it was still with him while he milked the cows and carried the foaming buckets over to the spring house and emptied them, filling the cooling pans. Anger flared when he heard the musical jangle of Jean's supper triangle calling him in for chow.

His lips had a sarcastic twist as he thought, maybe it won't be fit and proper for a man and a girl to sit down to eat without somebody else around.

Washing up at the pump behind the kitchen, Chuck let his eyes pick up the arrow-straight ribbon of road running off to infinity on the sun-painted flats toward Badwater. Five miles below the Flying W, another road forked off toward the Lazy L headquarters. The two ranches had a common drift fence far back in the Yellow Hills. At Comanche Springs the boundaries were divided by the arrowhead-shaped range which was Chuck's Circle F land.

As Chuck gazed at the road leading from Badwater, he saw a rider coming, a mere speck in the distance, but the sundown glare picked up the trailing ribbon of dust the

horse was kicking up. It must be Gorum, home-bound from town, nursing a sore jaw and a busted nose, and loaded to the gills with bad intentions toward Chuck Finley.

Would Gorum rein to the right when he hit the fork? Or would he keep on to the Flying W, knowing Jean and Chuck had preceded him, so he might be able to force a showdown here and now?

Chuck thought, maybe that's what Jean's afraid of. Maybe that's why she's forcing me to hit the trail for the roundup camp tonight. That seemed to be the only sensible explanation for Jean's stubborn insistence that he keep riding. The only other explanation would be that she didn't want him around, and she hadn't given any such impression this morning in the jail office.

When he went inside he saw that Jean had changed her riding clothes for a gingham dress, and that her auburn hair was tied back with a gay ribbon.

Seating himself at the dining-room table, where Jean had laid out a veritable banquet for him, he blurted, "You look mighty fixed up tonight, Jean. Is all that for me?"

It was the wrong thing to say. He could tell by the instant tautening of the girl's mouth. "I'm free, white, and just turned twenty," she reminded him stiffly. "I have no intention of going out of my way to please any man. It's just that I like to get into a dress once in awhile. Eat your supper."

Suddenly Chuck was aware that his ravenous appetite was gone. And he hadn't eaten a square meal in the six weeks he had been in Lex Colter's jail!

"Look here," he said angrily, setting down the coffee pot with a thump. "Are you all dressed up because you're expecting Bee Gorum tonight?"

Jean pushed her chair back and stood up, eyes blazing. "Chuck," she said tightly, "if you go on like this I'll be sorry I got you out of jail! If you only knew how I humiliated myself before Judge Coebalt, begging him to give you a chance."

FINLEY grunted skeptically, "The spread's short-handed for the calf gather. I thought Giff got me out by pleading hardship."

Jean picked up her plate and cup and headed for the kitchen. From behind the slammed door she called, "You can eat by yourself. I'll expect you to be saddled up and on your way within half an hour."

Jealous devils were pricking Chuck Finley as he forced himself to pitch into the meal. Hungry or not, he had to eat. There was an all-night ride between him and the Flying W branding camp where he would have his breakfast.

Before he was half finished eating he had made up his mind to one thing. He'd ride out within thirty minutes, all right, but there was nothing to keep him from circling around to find out if Bee Gorum was coming to court Jean tonight. If respectability ruled that he couldn't stick around the Flying W as long as Jean was here alone, then that rule applied to the Lazy L foreman as well.

Leaving the table, he approached the kitchen door with a boyish diffidence. But he wouldn't soon be getting another chance to see Jean, for the roundup would last quite a spell. Maybe he had gone off half cocked, accusing her of having a rendezvous with Gorum and wanting to get him, Chuck, off the place. Maybe he ought to apologize.

The swinging door was latched on the kitchen side.

"Jean!" he called remorsefully. "Before I hit the road I want to thank you for what you've done."

Getting no answer, he snatched up his Stetson and headed through the door to the porch. The kitchen windows were open. Peering inside, he saw Jean's untouched supper on the kitchen table. But she was not there. Obviously she had gone out the back way, to avoid him.

More embarrassed than angry, Chuck went out to the barn, saddled the sorrel stallion he called Rusty, led the mount over to the bunkhouse and went inside the shack. He felt like a stranger as he stared around at the familiar place which had been his home ever since he had gone to work for Giff Romaine as a skinny range orphan of fifteen. He had been drifting across country then, after he had lost his folks in a Kiowa massacre.

Even deserted, the bunkhouse looked lived in. The boys had left a deck of cards on

the table, laid out in a half-played solitaire game. But most of the double-decked bunks were stripped of soogans, and the straw tick mattresses were rolled up army style, as was usual during the crew's absence on roundup.

There was no bedding on his own bunk. He had been over on his Yellow Hills spread with his gear the night of the rustler raid when Pete Collier had been killed. Colonel Slankard and Bee Gorum and the other Lazy L riders who had showed up on the scene had prevented him from riding back to his camp for his gear. They had taken him straight to Badwater and the sheriff, bringing along Collier's body as evidence of murder.

The way Colonel Slankard had told it, he and his men had surprised Chuck working with a gang of Mexican renegades who were driving off a mixed herd of cattle, mostly Lazy L stuff.

A Lazy L rider had died in the ensuing gun battle. The killer had been Chuck Finley, so the Lazy L had said.

A canvas sack stamped with the name of a bank down in Mexico, and stuffed with gold *pesos,* had turned up in Chuck's saddle-bags when the sheriff had impounded his rig. That was proof that the renegades from south of the Border had paid Chuck for steering them to a gringo cattle herd, Colonel Slankard had insisted.

Chuck's defense had been an accusation that Slankard or one of his men had planted that telltale Mexican money in his saddle-bags during the ride to Badwater. It had been flimsy evidence against him, at that, but it had been enough to land him in jail. His insistence that he had just happened to be camped on his Circle F graze that night—admittedly just because he had wanted to be on ground that he owned—hadn't impressed the jury.

Somehow it hadn't seemed to ring true. Or so they had thought.

Oh, it had been a pretty frame-up, all right. The hell of it was that it had been so perfect he would have swung long ago, except for one thing. He owed his life right now to the fact that Pete Collier had been killed by a .45-70 rifle, and Chuck's own Winchester happened to be a .30-30.

IT WAS as plain as print to Chuck how the Lazy L had put the bind on him. The murder scheme had backfired; otherwise he would have wound up in the Badwater boot hill. Colonel Slankard could have bid in the Circle F at sheriff's auction, and Chuck's fifty sections of graze would have been added to the Lazy L.

More than that, with Chuck out of the way, Bee Gorum would have been left with the inside track to Jean's heart. Maybe he already had it, Chuck thought glumly. From the way Jean had been acting so stand-offish tonight, it looked like it.

Depressed to the point of despair, Chuck rustled up enough blankets in the bunkhouse to make a bedroll. He borrowed Slim Casey's slicker to wrap around the bundle, and from a deerhorn rack over the door took down a saddle gun and scabbard, a Winchester repeater that belonged to the cavvy wrangler, Spud Ingoldsby.

From his warsack under the bunk Chuck took a change of clothing, an extra pair of boots. Outside, loading his gear, he saw that the lights were still on in kitchen and dining room, but he couldn't see Jean moving around inside. She must be hiding out somewhere, waiting for him to leave.

"Bye, Jean!" Chuck shouted into the gathering darkness, and then he forked the sorrel.

He headed out past the barns and corrals at a reaching gallop, to make plenty of noise and let Jean know that she was respectable again.

If that had been Bee Gorum raising the big dust on the road from Badwater, he had had plenty of time to reach the Flying W by now—if that were where he had been heading.

What if Jean had seen the dust, too, and had walked down the road to meet Gorum and stall him off until she was sure the coast was clear?

It angered Chuck to be thinking thoughts like that about the girl he loved, suspecting Jean of conduct befitting a brazen dance-hall girl. Everything would be open and aboveboard with Jean Romaine, and he knew it. But he still couldn't stifle his own jealous thoughts.

Jean said, "Please, Chuck! I just don't feel like talking."

HEADING north, Chuck rode toward the Yellow Hills, lying rugged and remote under the stars. Topping a ridge a mile from the Flying W, he reined up to give the sorrel a breather, and hipped around in saddle to have a look at the twinkling lights marking the Flying W ranch house. He noticed, also, that he had forgotten to blow out the lantern when he had left the bunkhouse.

Some perverse curiosity prompted Chuck to unbuckle a saddle-bag and draw out the cased field glasses he carried. They had big lenses, for light-gathering power at night. They had come in handy while riding night herd; he had used them to make sure that some blur of movement in the moonlight wasn't a coyote pack on the prowl.

He focused the glasses on the lighted windows of the Romaine house down in the flats. The magnified field of vision was so clear he could pick out the waving curtains on the kitchen windows, until it seemed he could almost hear them rustle.

The front door was open, spilling a fanwise spread of light out into the yard. Silhouetted at the hitch-rack out front was a saddle horse. A rider was just dismounting.

Then he saw Jean coming down the porch steps to greet the visitor. But it wasn't until he saw the glitter of lamplight on the silver disks of the rider's flare-winged chaps that he was positive the man was Bee Gorum.

A vein started throbbing wildly on Chuck Finley's neck as he saw Gorum and Jean halt midway in the path. She was not going into Gorum's arms, though, as Chuck's jealousy had instantly anticipated. Instead, they appeared to be talking earnestly together. Then abruptly Bee Gorum swung away and vanished in the direction of the bunkhouse.

He thinks I'm still there, because of the light, Finley thought resentfully, swinging the glasses toward the bunkhouse, hoping to pick up Gorum. He's making sure the coast is clear.

Chuck Finley was so engrossed in watching, and in his own jealous thoughts, that he started violently as he heard a horse whicker suddenly in the night stillness. The sound came from somewhere to his left.

Looping the field glasses over the horn by the carrying strap, he reached to snake his borrowed carbine out of the boot under his right knee. But his keening ears picked up no further sound, and he saw no movement in the starlight.

Then, without warning, gun flame spewed from a cactus clump fifty yards away. A bullet made its air-whip against his cheek a split instant before the roar of a Winchester breached the stillness.

The big sorrel under Chuck reared and snorted in panic, and for the next moment he had his hands full keeping in saddle. Instinct made him rein Rusty sharply around, using his spurs to get the horse on the far slope of the ridge, away from the dangerous skyline.

Fighting the sorrel into control, Chuck laid a shot into the cactus, firing blind at the smudge of gunsmoke that was still lifting into the starlight. In answer, a slug sprayed his horse's brisket with flying gravel. Realization came then. Bushwhacker's got my range!

He wheeled Rusty and headed at breakneck pace down the ridge, where there would be concealment in the deeper shadows in the swale. But the hammering shots did not abate, each of them following in swift succession, proof that the drygulcher was following Chuck by his pony's dust trail.

Reining up when he reached level ground, Chuck dismounted and rested his smoking rifle over the saddle. Now the advantage was his. The bushwhacker would have to emerge from the cactus to get any nearer, and the moment he did, he would be skylined instead of Chuck.

What was this? What was it all about, anyway? Chuck coul'dn't lay the blame for these pot shots at him on Bee Gorum, his logical enemy. Gorum was down at the Flying W bunkhouse, a mile away. Chuck's own eyes had seen him there.

Had someone else followed him from Badwater, aiming to finish the job that had been started in Talus Canyon six weeks ago? Was there someone other than Gorum who wanted him dead?

STRAINING his eyes in the darkness, but failing to catch any sign of a target on the ridge crest above, Chuck Finley was suddenly alerted to more danger at his rear. Distinctly to his ears came the strike of iron-shod hoofs on rubble. Then another rider closed in.

Chuck was boxed in! At least two riders had been waiting for him, riders who must have watched him leave the Flying W, noted the direction he had taken, and followed unseen, watching for a bushwhack chance.

Up on the ridge, a man shouted between

cupped hands, "Watch it! He's forted up in that dry wash ahead of you!"

From somewhere nearby an approaching horse was reined in to an abrupt halt. Chuck heard the creak of saddle leather, the faint crunch of spurred boots on gravel, as a rider dismounted.

No answering shout came from the rider's partner, to give away where he was waiting in ambush. All Chuck could be sure about was that one rider was waiting to take a shot at him, and the other was stalking him on foot along the sandy bottom of this wash. The moon would not rise for another hour yet, but even when it was due to appear the storm clouds now gathering over the hills might blot it out. Meanwhile Chuck was in for this stalking business, at two-to-one odds.

Chuck hunted up a slab of lava rock and ground-anchored Rusty. Then he hustled off across the sandy creek bed until he found a jumble of boulders where he could fort up for trouble.

That he had been seen was plain, for the rifle up on the ridge cracked again, sharp against a background obligato of rolling thunder in the distance. A bullet richocheted off stony ground, not far from Chuck.

The shot, or the thunderclap, was enough to panic the horse Chuck had left behind him. He groaned as he saw Rusty jerk free of the anchoring rock and stampede off along the base of the ridge, empty stirrups flapping like crow's wings.

"We got him afoot!" came the throaty yell of the man on the ridge. "I'm coming down."

Finley levered a shell into the breech of his rifle. The ambushers were closing in from two directions, he knew, but there was no way to spot either rifleman, with the hillside in deep shadow.

At that tense moment a movement in a clump of bunch grass sent Chuck into action. Jerking his gun around, he fired. A big jackrabbit flopped into the open, drilled by the lucky shot. Then a man broke from the cover of a juniper fifty feet away and made for a black lava boulder.

For the briefest of instants Finley had the running man notched in his sights. He led his target by a step and squeezed off his shot. Through pluming gunsmoke he saw the crouched man jerk to a halt, then go down. Starlight glinted off naked gunmetal in his hand. In the next breath of time came the dull thud of a body hitting the dirt.

"One down, one to go," Finley breathed through clenched teeth, and thought, if he isn't playing possum.

From up the ridge came the throaty bawl of the other drygulcher. "Sing out! Are you all right down there?"

No answer came. After a long pause, the voice shouted again, from somewhere below the crest of the ridge, "Sing out, or I'm skinning out of here! I know Finley fired that shot!"

Chuck focused his eyes on the blurred, indistinct shape of the man sprawled beyond the far boulder. There was no movement, no sound. He could make out the blue shine of a rifle barrel lying beside the body. He could even see the still-quivering body of the rabbit.

Then he was brought up sharply by a racket in the brush and rocks above him. He caught a glimpse of a rider diving over the skyline, probably making for a horse he had left behind the cactus clump. But the fellow was moving so fast he was gone before Chuck could even swing his Winchester around.

CHUCK couldn't even gauge how long it was before the drumroll of a horse's hoofs was wafted over the ridge to his ears. He let out a long breath. Whoever it was who had been so anxious to kill him didn't have the stomach for a stalking fight unaided in the darkness, now that the victim had evened the odds. The surviving ambusher was pounding off along the far flank of the ridge —east, toward the Lazy L!

Another clatter of hoofs pulled Chuck's attention in the opposite direction. Was there still another gunhawk mixed up in this deal? What kind of a trap had he blundered into? Then he recognized his own stallion topping the ridge, heading back toward the home corral.

A chill wind was beginning to bluster down the ravine, but Chuck Finley was sweating. Fnially deciding it was safe enough now to leave his rock cover, he began to work his

way up the opposite slope, to get above and behind the drygulcher he had pegged. He had to be sure the man actually was out of the fight. He could be lying doggo, hoping to draw his intended victim within gun range.

Once in sight of the downed man Chuck knew, though, that he could take a point-blank bead on the huddled form and finish the fellow off for sure. But the possibility that he might be putting a bullet into a unconscious man went against Chuck's grain. Such an act was not in his nature. He had to have a close look, but he would not shoot.

Heading down the slope behind the fallen man, he caught sight of a gray saddle horse waiting further along the sandy wash. At Chuck's approach the horse headed up, snorted in terror, and bolted. With him went any chance of riding back to the Flying W to recover Rusty, or at least of reading the brand on that gray. Chuck moved down into the sandy creek bottom.

He was only a dozen feet from the ambusher now, close enough to see that the man was sprawled face down in the sand, arms outflung, and that the rifle he had dropped was out of his reach.

Moving in close then, Chuck stared down at a cowpuncher in bibless levis and a faded shirt. And even before he rolled the man over on his back and peered down into his sand-covered face, Chuck knew who he was, from the rivet-studded belt that girdled his middle. Orin Gaylord, the Lazy L blacksmith!

Blood was welling from a bullet hole over the dead man's heart. More had soaked into the dry sand. Finley's lucky shot had drilled Gaylord dead center.

Identifying his would-be killer sent cold tremors rushing through Chuck's vitals. Orin Gaylord was supposed to be asleep in a cell in Sheriff Colter's jail tonight. Neither he nor the other Lazy L puncher who had shot up a mirror in a Badwater saloon last Saturday night had served out their week yet.

Then Chuck Finley realized what had happened. And he also saw through this thing that had so nearly been his own finish. Bee Gorum had come to town to go bail for his two waddies. That was why he had been in Badwater with Jean this morning—to get Gaylord and Steve Robbins out of jail.

Steve Robbins had been the man waiting up on the ridge till Chuck got within point-blank range. It was Chuck's good luck that Robbin's first shot had gone wide by an inch, in the tricky night light.

Staring down at the blacksmith's death-contorted face, Chuck figured it for himself. Gorum and his two men must have seen him leaving the Flying W tonight. Gorum had sent Robbins and Gaylord on ahead to waylay Chuck, while Gorum fixed up his own alibi by going to see Jean.

Even before the thought was completed, Chuck had snatched up his rifle and was hot-footing it up the ridge. If he could get back to the Flying W before Gorum pulled out, he would have a rich prize to march back to the sheriff with tonight—Bee Gorum, and a dead man who had drawn Lazy L pay!

By the time Chuck reached the ridge, and could see the lights of the Flying W, the night wind had gained in strength and was spraying his face with stinging grit. That was bad. He had been counting heavily on bringing Sheriff Colter out here tomorrow to read sign and reconstruct for himself what had happened, so he would have to admit that two Lazy L riders had been waiting here in ambush.

If this wind kept up, though, hoof tracks and boot prints would be erased as if by a giant broom. And the sheriff would have only Chuck's story to go on. But the wind wouldn't blow away Orin Gaylord's two-hundred-pound corpse. No, sir. Chuck meant to be back to collect that evidence as quickly as he could get down to the ranch and rope a pack horse.

By the time he arrived at the Flying W, the wind was howling in from the Yellow Hills with all the fury of a spring sandstorm. Had it not been for the lighted windows of the ranch house, he might have lost his way crossing the flats, the flying dust was that heavy.

Turning in at the cavvy corral, he found his sorrel stallion, Rusty, quietly feeding in the lee of a haystack. "Leave me afoot, would you?" he growled. "I ought to thrash you with a halter chain, you broken-down crowbait."

He tied the runaway horse to a corral rail and groped through the flying dust to the

house. The kitchen windows went dark as he approached.

BEE GORUM'S black horse was no longer tied at the rack in front of the Flying W ranch house. Chuck Finley saw that even through the swirls of stinging sand that blinded his eyes. Maybe, ran his angry thought, he's stabled his black. If he's spending the night on the Flying W—

He pushed such a suspicion out of his head. Jean would never do such a thing in a million years. He crossed the yard, remembering how, through the field glasses, he had seen Gorum and Jean meet there. A moment later he was knocking on the front door.

Footsteps inside were barely audible outside, above the increased howling of the spring storm. Then Jean's voice called through the unopened door, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Jean. Chuck."

Jean flung open the door, and was silhouetted against the light, clutching a shotgun in her hands. "Chuck!" she cried. "I halfway expected you back. With that storm breaking—"

"Can I come in, Jean?"

"Of course. I'm sorry about our quarreling at suppertime, Chuck. Honest I am."

He stepped inside and closed the door against the organ hum of the wind. Jean took a quick step backward, shocked by his grim expression.

"Is something wrong, Chuck?" she demanded.

"Wrong?" Chuck laughed harshly. "Plenty's wrong. Has there been anybody here since I left?"

Jean's eyes narrowed. "You Peeping Tom!" she accused. "So you circled back to spy on me."

"I asked you a simple question, Jean," he said. "It's mighty important."

Jean carried the gun over to its antelope-prong rack over the fireplace. When she had deposited it and turned back, suppressed anger was in her face.

"You're trying to catch me in a lie, aren't you?" she said. "You know very well Bee was here tonight."

"What'd he want?"

Jean shrugged. "He wanted to pay you back for jumping him for nothing in Fishman's store this morning, for one thing."

"Where's Gorum now?" Chuck prodded. "In our bunkhouse?"

Jean looked defiant. "Of course not! He's trying to get home before the storm breaks. He wasn't here more than ten minutes. As soon as he'd made sure you weren't here, he—asked me an important question, then he left."

Chuck felt his heart sink. "What question?"

"Bee wants to marry me. He's inherited a cattle ranch of his own. He won't tell me where—maybe it's a long way off. He wants to surprise me when he takes me there as his bride."

Chuck's hands fisted at his sides. "Where does that leave me, Jean?" he asked helplessly. "What's become of our—friendship?"

For a moment he thought he saw a wistful tenderness in her eyes. Then they became stony again.

"What's our friendship got to do with my marrying Bee Gorum?" she asked coldly.

"You said yes, then?"

She looked away, her eyes suddenly moist. "That's none of your business, Chuck Finley. I'm tired. Please go now."

He pulled himself back to reality with an effort. "Sure, Jean. But before I leave you've got to know that since I saw you at supper tonight I've killed a man. It's the first time my gun ever took a human life."

"Chuck, no! You didn't!" Jean Romaine slumped weakly on the sofa. Her face had gone deathly pale as she whispered, "Not Bee? You didn't ambush Bee on his way home tonight?"

Chuck crossed the room to stand before Jean, but he could not read what was in her eyes.

"Not Bee Gorum," he said. "His blacksmith, Orin Gaylord. Out in the dry wash beyond the first ridge. He tried to gulch me."

JEAN stared at him blankly. "Bee told me he bailed out two of his men from jail this morning. Tell me what happened, Chuck."

He told her then of the attempt to ambush him. He wound up, "Bee Gorum was back

of it. He dropped in to see you to make sure of an alibi. He wanted a witness who could swear he wasn't guilty."

Jean came unsteadily to her feet. "You hate Bee," she said, in a shocked, accusing voice. "You've threatened his life. He told me so. You can't possibly prove he had anything to do with his two punchers jumping you out on the range tonight. He told me he left Gaylord and Robbins at the fork, that they were going on to the Lazy L."

Chuck turned and stalked to the door.

Jean called sharply, "Where are you going, Chuck? To trail Bee to the Lazy L?"

Hand on the door knob, he grinned at her bleakly. "I'm going to get Gaylord's carcass and pack it to town tonight."

A blast of wind swept in as he opened the door, but he fought through it, closed the door, and stalked through the night to the horse barn. He was slipping a halter on a pack animal when Jean came into the barn, wearing an oilskin slicker. Beneath it she was wearing levis and a man's shirt.

"I'm going to ride with you, Chuck," she said uneasily. "You'll need a witness, maybe, to testify where Gaylord was when you shot him."

He made no protest, merely saddling up for her in silence. Mounting, they rode out together, heading away from the Flying W, Chuck once more aboard Rusty.

It took them the better part of an hour to reach the crest of the ridge where Robbins had taken his first shot at Chuck.

The wind had moderated some, and the flying sand with it. The storm was moving on, though its fury had not abated with its change of locale. When they came into the ravine, Chuck picked out the big lava boulder beside which Gaylord had fallen.

"Wait here!" he shouted to Jean. "I'll lash him on the pack horse. You'll see where it happened by the next lightning flash. That'll be all you'll want to see. Gaylord isn't a pretty sight."

Jean's stricken voice came to him. "I wish we'd brought a shovel, Chuck. You ought to bury Gaylord right where he lies or better, carry him far off and bury him where nobody will ever find him!"

Chuck blinked in astonishment. "Why do that? According to law I have to report this, and you know I swore not to break any laws."

Jean shook her head. "Think, Chuck. You can't prove you shot Gaylord in self-defense! You can't afford to take the chance."

"I have nothing to hide," Chuck declared. "You wait here."

He put Rusty down the slope, steering in the general direction of the black boulder down there. A rift came in the ragged cloud formations and a full moon wheeled into a patch of open sky, flooding the scene with an eerie glow.

Chuck Finley dismounted alongside the black boulder and walked over to the open sand on which Orin Gaylord had died. But no dead man was in sight!

Chuck's first thought was that the storm had covered the body with blowsand. But that was impossible, he knew, when he caught sight of the jackrabbit's carcass, only half covered by rippled sand.

Chuck felt as though he were choking as he stumbled forward and looked down at the dead rabbit, then at the nearby bunchgrass clumps where the rabbit had caught the bullet. He squatted down, raking his splayed fingers through the sand. The dirt was black in the moonlight, soaked with Gaylord's blood.

A sound startled him, and he turned quickly. Jean had ridden down the slope behind him, against his orders. Before she could say a word he came to his feet, a stricken expression on his face, and pointed down at the sand.

"Robbins," he said dully. "He must have doubled back and picked up his partner's body. Gaylord was lying right here. Robbins even moved this rabbit I killed over here, to account for the blood in the sand."

Jean stiffened in her saddle. "Look somewhere else," she said quickly. "You must have made a mistake, Chuck."

He shook his head desperately. "No. I'm positive this is the place. I couldn't miss a carcass as big as Orin Gaylord's. And he was running from those very junipers yonder to this boulder when I got him."

Jean wheeled her horse, and reached to undally the pack mare's trail rope from Rusty's saddlehorn.

Turning around in her saddle, she cried hoarsely, "You tricked me with that far-fetched story, Chuck! There wasn't any dead man. Nobody tried to ambush you. You shot a rabbit and came back to the ranch with a flimsy story as your excuse for snooping on Bee and me."

Chuck Finley was angry himself then, too angry at first to speak, and by the time he could, it was too late. Jean was spurring back up the hill, leading the pack mare. She was on her way home, and it was obvious she was in no mood for him to follow her.

AN OVERWHELMING sense of futility flooded over Chuck Finley as he remounted and rode up the sandy wash and back, looking for black boulders. Desperately he tried to convince himself that he had made a mistake, that Gaylord had fallen near another boulder. But it was impossible. The explanation was too obvious to overlook. Robbins had come back when Chuck left, and had taken his dead friend away.

Why, it had to be that way! The Lazy L couldn't risk having one of their men found shot on Flying W land. That would substantiate Chuck Finley's story that an ambush attempt had been made on his life tonight.

Briefly Chuck considered riding back to Badwater tonight for a talk with the sheriff, but decided against it. Sheriff Colter would laugh in his face, maybe slap him back in jail.

The storm had done a good job of erasing all visible evidence of the bushwhacking. By now Robbins probably was talking things over with Bee Gorum. Disposing of Gaylord's body would be their problem. In any event, Chuck had lost his last chance to prove that a trap had been set, with him as the intended victim.

Rain began falling out of the murky sky, but Chuck did not bother to put on his slicker. Might as well push on to roundup camp in the Yellow Hills, he thought. He was due there before sunup, but he would never make it now. It was too far.

As the hours passed, while he bucked the rainstorm through the dark night, after awhile it got so the disappearance of Gaylord's body didn't matter so much any more. What rode heavily on Chuck's spirits was that Jean thought he was a liar—and that Bee Gorum had asked her to marry him.

What had her answer been? Not that it should make any difference to Chuck. The way things looked now, he didn't think he had a chance with Jean. Damn it, why hadn't he told her long ago that he loved her? Where had he gotten the idea she knew what was in his heart?

After those long hours of riding through the rain, it was in the bright sunshine of a rain-washed morning that Chuck located the Flying W roundup camp. He marked it by the smoke of the chuckwagon cookfire lifting between the stony caps of parallel ridges at the upper end of Postoak Canyon.

The rainstorm had passed before dawn, and had left the sagebrush sparkling and free of dust. The sky was enamel blue, without a fleck of cloud on the horizons. It was a morning to lift a man's spirits, but Chuck Finley rode in and dismounted beside the wagon with the feeling that he was a thousand years old.

Woo Fong, the cook who had been with Flying W ever since Giff Romaine had wooed him away from a railroad construction camp up in Kansas ten years before, chattered a greeting. His Oriental sing-song was almost unintelligible, but it told Chuck how much Flying W had missed him and how welcome he was.

Romaine and the crew were already out in the brakes chousing she-stuff out of the brush and branding the spread's increase. Chuck stripped off his soaked shirt and levis and changed to dry duds from his saddle bag. He tossed his bedroll with the others, where a wagon tarp had hastily been erected between four postoaks before last night's rain. There were brown puddles everywhere, and Woo Fong was cursing about the lack of dry firewood.

The cavvy was on picket downgrade from the roundup camp, and Chuck turned Rusty out to graze. He felt stiff and sore from the night-long ride through the storm, and oppressed by a feeling that some black cloud of calamity was hanging over him. Being out of jail on probation could account for that, of course, but Chuck doubted it. It was more

likely he felt as if the end of the world had come because he and Jean had lost their close rapport since yesterday, and because she might be going to marry Bee Gorum.

Chuck ate breakfast, tossed his dishes into Woo Fong's wreck pan, and selected a horse for the day's work. The crew, Woo Fong told Chuck, was working the hills east of camp today, and would be tomorrow.

Chuck rode out of camp at ten o'clock, topping a ridge to locate the smoke spirals which would mark the branding-iron fires, three ridges over. The thought struck him that the roundup had pushed over the Flying W line into his own Circle F holdings.

A curdled bitterness welled up in him as he realized again that the Mexican rustler raid had cleaned him out. He'd be lucky if the branding crew even had occasion to heat up a Circle F iron this spring. The wet-backers had whittled his calf crop down close to zero by driving off the Circle F mothers. And by now the buzzards and coyotes would have cleaned up the maverick calves. Nothing would be left of the Circle F—nothing.

SOMETHING was wrong. Chuck Finley knew that when he crested a rise and looked down on the main branding camp. It looked as if the whole crew were assembled there. It was too early for noon chow, and besides the men would not have stopped here to eat, anyhow. They would have drifted back to the chuckwagon in Postoak Canyon, only a mile to the west. Woo Fong had said the base camp wouldn't be moved until the surrounding territory had been combed for strays, which would take two days.

Why the convention down there, then? All of those riders were not Flying W punchers, either. Some of them would be reps from Colonel Slankard's Lazy L. Maybe trouble had broken between the rival ranches, trouble stemming from last month's rustler raid.

Coming down the slope, Chuck heard someone shout his name, and the next moment old Giff Romaine was spurring up the rise to meet him. Chuck grinned, but the grin was instantly wiped off. For this was no welcoming of the prodigal. Chuck knew that, the moment Romaine was close enough for him to see the grim, almost frightened look on the boss's face.

At sixty, Gifford Romaine still had the ramrod carriage he had developed as a cavalryman in the Civil War. He was dressed now in a brushpopper jumper, with his guns strapped on the outside, for the Yellow Hills concealed plenty of the owlhoot breed. A man never knew, on roundup, when he might surprise a mavericker blotting a brand on a calf out in the brush.

"Chuck, you're late," was Romaine's greeting. His mouth was hard under the tobacco-stained mustache. "I expected you before breakfast. Jean said she'd send you straight out."

"Rainstorm slowed me down," Chuck said succintly, "and I ran into a mite of trouble this side of the Flying W."

Romaine gestured toward the group of cowhands gathered around a branding fire on the flat below. In the distance the group of riders had a jag of mixed-brand cattle rounded up.

"Well, you've run into another mess of trouble out here," Romaine said enigmatically. "I still don't see how come you took so long to get here. That measly storm couldn't have held you up for five hours. What time did you leave the Flying W last night?"

Chuck said, "You mean the first time, or after I went back?"

He broke off, seeing two riders leave the group around the branding fire. One was Bee Gorum, wearing a taped bandage over his broken nose. The other was Colonel Slankard. Because of bad health, he had turned the running of the spread over to his ramrod in recent years.

"Chuck," Romaine implored, "Tell me you didn't ambush Slankard's blacksmith on the way up here last night! That's what Gorum's telling everybody."

Before Chuck could answer, Gorum and Slankard reined their horses to a bucking halt on either side of Romaine. Chuck's hand dropped to his gun butt.

Colonel Tom Slankard looked like the sick man he was. He had been living on borrowed time ever since he had had a serious heart attack last winter. He had been Romaine's commanding officer during the Civil War, hav-

ing held a brigadier general's rank by brevet. The two of them had taken up adjoining soldier's donation claims out here in the Yellow Hills after Appomatox. As ranchers, Slankard and Romaine had prospered. And always they had been the closest of friends.

But Chuck was not thinking of Colonel Slankard now. His eyes were on Bee Gorum. He said sourly, "I'm curious to know what kind of a frame-up you've cooked up during the night, Bee. Was it you who picked up Gaylord's carcass, or did Steve Robbins do that?"

In Colonel Slankard's eyes was an anguished shine as he looked at Romaine. "Guess you figured him wrong, Cliff. Looks like he's as good as admitting he drygulched Orin Gaylord last night. I was expecting he would at least try to crawfish out of it, like he tried to do after that rustler raid last month."

ROMAINE lifted a protesting hand. "Let's give Chuck a chance to tell his side of it, Colonel. Chuck, we have a dead man lashed to a bronc, down below. It's Orin Gaylord, with a rifle slug in his left lung. Colonel Slankard here claims you ambushed his blacksmith on the way up from Badwater last night. He claims it can be proved."

Chuck's taut smile never left his lips, but he had the feeling of having been caught between the crushing jaws of a trap. "I killed Gaylord, yes," he said. "But where it happened was deep in Flying W graze, boss. And it was either him or me."

As Chuck spoke, from the corner of his eye he caught sight of another rider cutting away from the tense bunch of mixed Lazy L and Flying W cowhands. Chuck recognized him instantly—Steve Robbins, the other bushwhacker he had tangled with last night.

Chuck was silent for so long that Romaine said impatiently, "Let's have your story, son. Colonel, you and Bee let him do his talking without interruption."

Bee Gorum's shoulders lifted and fell. His fancy coat was still wet, proof that he had been out in last night's storm. He said nothing.

But Chuck did. Speaking tersely, he outlined all that had happened after he had had supper with Jean at the Flying W.

He wound up, "Now you see why I'm late getting in, boss. You can believe it or not. Like I said, either Robbins or Gorum high-tailed with that blacksmith's carcass, to keep me from proving the shooting was done on Flying W range."

Steve Robbins, riding up, had joined them by now. In his glittering eyes was a smug look as he stared at Chuck. But he did not speak, either, apparently waiting for the signal from his boss.

"You finished, Finley?" Colonel Slankard demanded. "You've laid all your cards on the table?"

Chuck shrugged. "You've seen the cards I was dealt, yes."

Slankard turned to Gorum and Robbins. "Tell Finley what you told me over at the Lazy L last night."

Gorum spoke to Romaine directly. "Like I've already said, I bailed out Gaylord and Steve in town yesterday morning. When we reached the fork in the road below your place, I sent my boys on toward the home ranch while I went over to the Flying W to have a word with Jean. I had hoped I'd find Chuck there so I could square myself for the beating he gave me in Fishman's store yesterday, when he caught me off guard."

Chuck broke in sarcastically, "Moe Fishman knows why I hung one on your beak, Bee. You were calling me a killer and a jailbird."

Gorum went on as if he hadn't heard. "Jean told me Chuck was heading out for the round-up camp last night, so I headed for home. A mile or so up the Lazy L road, I heard a gun shot. I couldn't be sure I'd heard it, because the thunderstorm was brewing then. I rode on a piece—"

Romaine flashed a piercing look at his rider and cut in, "This was on the Lazy L side of the line, was it, Bee?"

Gorum nodded. "A good two miles off Flying W range, Mr. Romaine. Anyway, I kept riding. Then I heard somebody yell. It was Steve Robbins, on the road ahead of me. By a flash of lighning I saw him bending over somebody stretched out on the ground. When I rode up I saw it was Orin Gaylord."

Romaine said musingly, "This was at Arch Rock, I believe you said."

"Just beyond Arch Rock," Steve Robbins spoke up. "Whoever shot Orin was holed up behind the rock, shooting through the arch. I saw the flash of the gun, and I saw Orin knocked out of his saddle. Before I could unlimber my carbine—"

Chuck Finley said acidly, "I reckon another real accommodating flash of lightning showed me hightailing away from Arch Rock, eh, Steve?"

STEVE ROBBINS grimaced. "I was maybe fifty yards behind Orin when it happened, else I might of gotten shot, too!" he said angrily. "I'd stopped to tighten my cinch. By the time I got to Orin, sprawled there in the road, the bushwhacker had gone. He was a quarter of a mile off when the next lightning flash came. He was forking a sorrel."

Chuck turned to Romaine. "Arch Rock is five miles away from where I shot Gaylord. Robbins here lugged his body over to the Lazy L road, and waited for Bee to show up after he'd stopped by the Flying W."

Romaine was staring straight ahead, seeing nothing, looking older than Chuck could recall ever having seen him look.

"Anyway," Steve Robbins went on briskly, "Orin lived maybe half an hour, but he was unconscious most of the time. Just after Bee rode up Orin come to long enough to say, 'Chuck Finley got me, Steve.' That's exactly what he said, and then he said, 'Chuck was waiting for you and me to show up, Steve. I reckon he mistook me for Bee. He was out to get Bee.' And then he died."

For a long moment there was a weighty silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of the horses.

Then Bee Gorum said, "That's how it was, Mr. Romaine. I got there in time to hear what Orin said. But before I could ask him anything, Orin was dead. Steve and I brought him to the Lazy L, and reported to Colonel Slankard."

The oppressive sensation of being smothered had turned Chuck Finley cold and sick. Staring past the others, he caught sight of the men on the flats below, drifting away from a horse on which a tarp-wrapped body was tied. Orin Gaylord.

"Well, Giff," Colonel Slankard said, "that's the deal. In view of our long friendship, I hate to see this happen. But I have to do my duty." Without warning he snapped a sixgun from leather and trained it on Chuck. "I'm making a citizen's arrest, and we're taking you back to town, Finley, just as we did once before. Only this time you won't get a chance to get out of a hangman's noose."

Romaine slumped in resignation. Then he squared his shoulders and spurred forward, reaching out to lift Chuck's guns from their holsters and stuff them in one of his own cantlebags. Chuck made no move to resist.

"I'm mighty sorry, son," Romaine said heavily. "But it's your word against two witnesses, who are quoting a dead man. But don't worry. Jean can testify as to why you were delayed several hours getting out here from the Flying W. That will explain the time you lost, the time the Lazy L figures you were out in their territory lying in wait to bushwhack Gaylord."

Chuck stared at the black bore of Colonel Slankard's gun. This was the second time he had faced the rancher's implacable enmity, after years of friendly association with the old Texan. Even now, he could not honestly feel that Colonel Slankard hated him.

Chuck said to Romaine, "If you let a Lazy L posse take me to Badwater I'll never get there alive, boss. They'll trump up a yarn about me trying to escape, and deliver me to the sheriff with a bullet in my back."

Romaine glanced at Colonel Slankard, who had holstered his gun to gather up his bridle reins. "Colonel, like you say, we've been close friends for quite a while. But there's something in what Chuck says. I have to insist on riding along with him. And I'll insist on taking two of my men with me, to even up for Gorum and Steve."

Slankard reined his horse around. His craggy face looked tired and haunted. "Of course, Giff," he said dully. "You aren't responsible for one of your men turning lobo. This business doesn't have to make any trouble between you and me."

The click of Sheriff Colter's key in the cell lock had a note of finality about it, as conclusive as the slam of a dropping gallows trap.

"This time you won't be drawing a detail

in the brickyard, Chuck," the lawman said. "You'll roost here in solitary until Judge Coebalt gets back from his circuit." He clomped away, his keys jangling.

Chuck stretched out on the cot, hands clasped under his head, staring at the plank ceiling. Sundown light streamed through the iron-latticed window above the cot. His bones ached from the afternoon's ride down from the Yellow Hills. At no time had they been close enough to the Flying W so they could ride over and let Jean know what had happened. That was just as well.

An hour after the sheriff had left the bullpen, old Bad Luck Babcock brought Chuck a tray of food from a restaurant. Bad Luck was in his usual ghoulish mood.

Chuckling, he observed, "Always figured you were born to hang, Chuck. You got bad blood in you. Out of jail less'n a day, and you kill a man! Some folks are like that, though. They have to kill and kill."

BAD LUCK lighted a lantern, but its flickering light only accented Chuck's lonely state. His cell now was in the solitary-confinement wing of the jail, separated from the main cell block by a brick partition. He could hear Hobo Joe in there, playing his harmonica.

Chuck had finished eating when he heard voices in the front office, and shortly he had a visitor. It was the last person he expected to see, Colonel Slankard.

For a moment the old warrior stood gripping the bars of the cell and peering in at the cowboy stretched out on the cot. "Chuck," he said then, hoarsely, "something's been working on my mind ever since your Pete Collier trial. Reckon you know it came as a welcome surprise to me when it was proved you hadn't shot my cavvy wrangler."

Chuck Finley swung his legs off the cot and sat up. He was puzzled by Slankard's apologetic tone. But he said, "I thought you already had that coroner's evidence figured out, Colonel! You know all about how I bribed him to lie about the caliber of the bullet he dug out of Pete's carcass."

Colonel Slankard's face looked like a skull under the lantern glow. "I never accused you of bribing anyone, son," he said gently. "That was my foreman's idea—Bee Gorum's."

Chuck grunted disdainfully. "Same difference. You both have the same polecat blood in you."

Slankard sighed wearily. "At the trial," he said, "you claimed you were being railroaded. It was the reason you gave for making such a statement that has been nagging at my mind ever since. You remember why you said Gorum and I were railroading you?"

Chuck nodded. It seemed impossible, but Slankard was acting like a friend. What was his angle tonight?

"It's easy to add up, Colonel." Chuck Finley shrugged. "I own a wedge of choice range between your ranch and the Flying W. It has good grass and water; it's the best hunk of graze in the Yellow Hills. If I were dead, you'd be able to buy up my Circle F range and add it to the Lazy L."

A tragic expression came to Slankard's face now. "I'll be seventy-eight in July, Chuck. I haven't many more years left. Why would I want more land? Why would a man who has led an honorable life suddenly want to railroad a neighbor to the gallows, just to seize his land?"

Chuck thought that over, and couldn't come up with a logical answer. He had never looked at it from the colonel's viewpoint before, so convinced had he been that Slankard was his foe.

"Maybe," he said finally, "it's because you have a ramrod working for you who has big ideas. Bee Gorum might want to add some land to the Lazy L, to make himself big in your eyes, or—" Suddenly he paused, as another train of thought occurred to him. "Wait a minute, Colonel. Did you know that Gorum wants to marry Jean Romaine? Did you know he's inherited a ranch somewhere or other and wants to take Jean to it as his bride?"

Colonel Slankard swayed back from the cell bars, a stricken look on his face. "I know Bee's in love with Giff's daughter, yes."

"Then maybe Gorum wanted me out of the way so he could get my Circle F range and add it to the Flying W some time in the future. If he married Jean, he'd have the Flying W when her father dies."

COLONEL SLANKARD'S thoughts seemed to come back from a great distance. In a hushed whisper he said, "Chuck, I've never questioned my foreman's integrity. In a way, Bee Gorum has been like my own son. So much for that. Chuck, can you keep something in strict confidence?"

Finley came to his feet, his heart suddenly purged of all animosity for this old-timer. "Sure I can, Colonel. What's on your mind?"

Slankard dragged a shaking hand across his forehead. "I had a heart attack last winter, Chuck—you know about that. I almost cashed in my chips. When I pulled out of it, I sent for Harley Owens, my lawyer. I hadn't even made a will, but I took care of that. I bequeathed everything I own in this world—the Lazy L, mining stocks, all my tangible assets—to the man who was closer to me than anyone living—Bee Gorum."

The truth hit Chuck Finley like a dash of ice water, clearing his head. Random bits of his jigsaw puzzle fell into position to fill out an ugly picture of rangeland intrigue.

Only last night, when Bee Gorum had asked Jean to marry him, he had told her that he had inherited a cattle ranch. Maybe he had meant he was going to inherit a ranch, when Colonel Slankard was gone. If a man in Slankard's precarious state of health should be found dead, apparently from natural causes, no questions would be raised. And if Bee Gorum owned the Lazy L and married Jean Romaine, in due time he would be in supreme control of every inch of range in the Yellow Hills, except for Chuck Finley's Circle F, square in the middle of the whole shebang.

"I don't know what's going to be the outcome of this murder charge Bee has saddled you with, Chuck," Colonel Slankard said heavily, "but I do know this. Lawyer Owens will be back from Tres Cruces tomorrow. I'm going to spend the night in Badwater, and be at the stage depot to meet him. I'm going to make a new will, Chuck, cutting off Bee Gorum without a penny. I'm going to leave everything to Owens."

The cell block door opened and Sheriff Colter stuck his head in. "Time's up, Colonel."

Finley reached through the bars to grip Slankard's bony hand.

"Thanks for telling me all this, Colonel. I don't think you're making a mistake."

Slankard nodded. As he turned toward the office door he said, "Gorum's over at Tony's Saloon. I'm going over there now and tell him exactly what I'm doing. There's a chance—a small chance, son—that maybe such a bombshell will show Bee he's making a mistake in accusing you of murder. Maybe he and Steve will change their testimony about Orin Gaylord's dying words. Maybe they'll admit it was a mistake."

Sleep refused to come to Chuck, exhausted as he was after forty-eight hours without rest. On the way down from the Yellow Hills he had come to the bitter conclusion that there was no way he could escape being hanged for Gaylord's killing.

Then came Colonel Slankard's surprise visit, when by inference he had shown that he believed Chuck innocent. Would the threat of being disinherited make Bee Gorum drop his murder charges? Greed was a powerful force, more powerful even than hate. If Bee Gorum thought he had a chance to keep on the colonel's good side by removing Chuck Finley from the shadow of doom, he might do it.

It was long past midnight when, tossing restlessly on his bunk, Chuck heard the clink of a key in the door opening into the cell blocks from the office. Sheriff Colter, he knew, went off duty at nine o'clock, leaving the jail in charge of Bad Luck Babcock, who slept in the jail office.

THE BULLPEN door opened and Chuck heard the raspy sawing of a man's breathing. Then the unmistakable thud of Bad Luck's peg leg on the brick floor identified his visitor. Chuch tensed, a shudder rippling down his spine. Was this a routine night check the jailer was making?

"Chuck, you awake?"

Chuck sat up on the cot. He was fully dressed, even to his boots. There was no object in feigning sleep. "What do you want, Bad Luck?"

Babcock chuckled. "I'm bringing you more good luck than you ever had in your misspent life. You have a candle on the shelf. Light it. I have something to show you."

Curious about this nocturnal visit, Chuck fished a match from his levis pocket and touched it to the wick of a stubby candle stuck in a beer bottle on the shelf beside his cot. The pale yellow light revealed old Babcock, grinning toothlessly outside the bars. Looped over his scrawny wrist was Sheriff Colter's ring of keys.

Bad Luck was thrusting a folded piece of paper through the bars. "Read this," he whispered. "It's from your friend Bee Gorum."

Scowling, every nerve on edge, Chuck Finley jerked the paper from the jailer's hand and carried it over to the candle. His recognized Bee Gorum's flourishing handwriting. The note read:

> Chuck:
> Jean got into town with Slim Casey at ten o'clock. Her father sent for her after we got to Badwater.
> Maybe you know Jean and me aim to get married. But she says she can't go through with it if your ghost comes between us. She made me give her my word of honor you would not hang for Gaylord's murder.
> The thing's gone too far for me to withdraw the charges. You can see that. But I can get you out of jail. Bad Luck will tell you how and when. Play your cards like he tells you and you're a free man, Chuck.
> Beeman Gorum, Jr.

Anger flowed through Finley as he crushed the paper into a ball and thrust it into his pocket.

He rasped to Babcock, "Tell Gorum to go to hell! He's trying to buy Jean Romaine, with me as the ante in the pot. Tell him it's no dice."

The grin faded from Bad Luck's face. He thrust his hand through the bars and let Chuck see a thick packet of yellow-backed currency clutched in his fist.

"Gorum bribed me with five hundred to deliver that message. He'll double that when you're out of jail. You have to do it. Don't you have sense enough to know you'll hang if you don't grab this chance?"

Chuck Finley shook his head. "No dice. Not where Jean's concerned. I'd hang first."

"Then hand me back that paper."

Finley laughed harshly. "Not a chance. I'm showing this to Sheriff Colter in the morning. Any idea how many years you'll draw for taking a bribe to let an accused killer break jail, Bad Luck?"

Babcock's hand dropped to the sixgun at his hip. For a panicked moment, Chuck Finley believed the jailer was going to gun him down, if need be, to recover the damning evidence that was Gorum's note. Instead, Babcock began to wheedle.

"It's simple and it's safe, son. At three o'clock sharp—one hour from now—I unlock your cell. You hurry over to the wagon yard back of the Wells Fargo station. Gorum will be waiting there with a saddle horse, and money to see you out of Texas."

Chuck smiled tautly. "I reckon I'm to agree to skip the country and never come back, huh? I reckon he wants a deed to my Circle F range before he turns that saddle horse over to me tonight?"

Sweat was pouring down Bad Luck's face like the wax on a sputtering candle. "It's so damn easy!" he pleaded. "And I'll be in the clear. After you pull out, I take a crowbar and pry your window bars loose. It will look like an outside job to the sheriff tomorrow. He won't pin it on me. I'll see to that."

Indecision began to gnaw at Chuck Finley now, though he knew that if he became a party to this conspiracy it meant he would leave Badwater a wanted man. Flight across the Border would be tantamount to a confession that he had murdered Orin Gaylord exactly as Gorum and Steve Robbins had charged. He would be banished from his home range for life.

He thought, I can go over to the Wells Fargo wagon yard and meet Gorum face to face tonight. I could smoke him down before I left.

BUT he crowded the temptation aside. In the first place, his guns were in the sheriff's custody. Giff Romaine had turned them over to Colter upon their arrival in Badwater, and they were now locked up in Colter's iron-barred cabinet.

Another thought came. I wouldn't live to reach that yard, with Gorum behind the Wells Fargo shack. He'd have Steve Robbins planted in some alley to cut me down the instant I left the jail. I'd be a prime target in the moonlight.

Sure, that was it. After a gunshot breached the night he would be found dead, shot by Bad Luck Babcock. A man crooked enough to help an accused killer break jail would be crooked enough to have a hand in killing an escaped prisoner. Maybe Bad Luck's part in the scheme was to shoot him in the back and leave his body under the cell window.

But that wasn't why he was turning down this too-pat deal, he belatedly realized. If Jean Romaine's marriage to Gorum hinged on his leaving Texas as an owlhooter on the dodge, then maybe standing trial for Gaylord's murder would keep Gorum and Jean apart forever.

Chuck's thoughts had come so swiftly he didn't realize how fast time was passing until Bad Luck Babcock panted hoarsely, "Well, how about it, fellow? I'll need plenty of time to pry those window bars loose. Gorum will have the horse waiting for you at three-fifteen sharp."

Chuck Finley sat down on his bunk, shaking his head. "It's no dice, Bad Luck, like I told you. It looks like five hundred is all you'll be getting from Gorum. I'm staying here."

The candle blinked out, filling the stuffy cell with the odor of its expiring smoke. From the darkness came Babcock's obscenity, the plunk of his wooden leg as he clattered back to the office door.

"I'll be back in thirty minutes," came his whisper. "That'll give you time to think it over. The chance won't come again. Think over what it'll feel like to get a black cap put over your head and a hemp necktie around your throat. Think it over." The bullpen door clicked shut.

Chuck's heart was slamming like a pile-driver. Was he being a damned fool, sacrificing himself to a hangrope just to keep Jean from marrying another man?

But there was a faint glimmer of hope remaining. Gorum's note to him, unquestionably in Gorum's handwriting—he could show that to Sheriff Colter. Colter might be hard-bitten, but he was as honest as the day was long, wanting only to see justice done.

Maybe a judge and jury would think twice about hanging a man when indisputable evidence was offered in court to prove that one of the plaintiffs had attempted to bribe a jailer to set the prisoner free.

Gorum would deny writing the note, of course, just as Bad Luck Babcock would deny ever having delivered it. They would stick tight together on that. They could always claim Finley forged the note, and carry the frame-up through to the finish.

Chuck struck a match and consulted his watch. Babcock's thirty-minute deadline had passed. Maybe Bad Luck wasn't coming back, after all. Maybe he had gone to report to Bee Gorum.

Suddenly a clash of voices in the sheriff's office startled Chuck out of his run of bleak thoughts. Was his mind playing him tricks, or did he hear a woman's voice in the office?

He leaped up just as the bullpen door opened to show Babcock, in a glare of lamplight, lurching backward into the cell block. And stalking him, with the muzzle of a cocked revolver rammed into his scrawny ribs, was Jean Romaine!

"It's a penitentiary offense, helping a killer break jail, lady!" Babcock croaked. "You can't get away with it."

"Shut up, you old fool!" Jean commanded, forcing him ahead of her. "Chuck?"

"Jean!" Chuck Finley cried, aghast. "What's going on?"

WITH the sheriff's keys in one hand, and still keeping Babcock under the threat of her gun, Jean sidled over to Chuck's cell and thrust a key into the lock—a key which Babcock obviously must have selected for her during their argument in the office.

"I'm getting you out of this place, Chuck,' Jean said, pulling the door open. "I have horses waiting. We're getting out of Badwater tonight, Chuck, forever."

Chuck felt rooted in his tracks. "Jean, you can't do this! Babcock's right. When he tells what you've done, you can be put behind bars till you're old and gray."

Jean smiled grimly. Her eyes were red and swollen from weeping. She looked haggard, but to Chuck she was beautiful.

"Take care of this miserable old man, Chuck," she pleaded. "Knock him out or gag him. We can't waste any time."

Bad Luck Babcock chose this moment to collapse in a dead faint. He lay on the floor quivering, dead to the world. And still the chains of paralysis held Chuck Finley motionless.

"But Jean, you're going to marry Bee Gorum!"

Her eyes misted. "Who said I was? You blind, stupid fool, don't you know I've loved you since I was a kid? I've even tried to make you jealous, but it won't work!"

A heady ecstacy rioted through Chuck Finley as he gave way to the wild abandonment of a passion which up to now he had never dared express. In the end it was Jean who pulled away from him, backing away and gesturing with her gun at the sprawled jailer.

"He'll come to any minute," she said hurriedly. "Do something, Chuck. Let's get out of here. It'll be daylight in another couple of hours. We have to be long gone before Lex Colter shows up at the jail."

Chuck stumbled out of the cell, pulling the bandanna neckerchief away from his throat. He knelt down and tied the scarf in a tight gag around Bad Luck's jaws.

"Did Bee tell you he was going to get me out of jail tonight?" he asked hesitantly. "Did he make a deal with you after you got in town from the Flying W, Jean?"

She stared down at him uncomprehendingly, and said flatly, "I haven't talked to Bee since I got to town. I saw him, yes—over at the Drover's Hotel where Dad got a room for me. But I was at the door of my room and he couldn't see me from the lobby, where he was arguing with Colonel Slankard."

"When was that?" Chuck extracted the handcuffs from Bad Luck's hip pocket and notched one of the manacles over the jailer's left wrist.

"When was it?" Jean repeated. "Around twelve o'clock. Chuck, something's gone wrong between Bee and Slankard, but I don't know what."

Chuck said nothing. He had a pretty good idea what was wrong between the Lazy L boss and his ramrod. They had, of course, been discussing the change Slankard meant to make in his will.

"We'll lock Babcock up in my cell, Jean," he said, "but if you think the two of us are lighting out of here tonight, you're mistaken. We have nothing to run for."

Jean burst into tears as Chuck dragged the groaning jailer into the cell. Planting Babcock's shoulders against the bars, Chuck pulled the old man's arms through and handcuffed them on the outside. When the oldster came back to his senses, it would be impossible for him to claw off his gag. He would be trapped like this until the sheriff arrived in the morning.

Jean said in a broken whisper, "We have to run, Chuck! It's the only thing left for us to do. I had a talk with Dad tonight. He says you haven't got a cance to beat the noose, this time. Not with a dead man's accusation against you—and two witnesses. Not after all the threats you made about putting two notches on your guns."

Chuck Finley came out of the cell and removed the keyring from the lock. Shame tinged his cheeks scarlet. "That was just talk," he mumbled. "Blowing off steam."

"The trouble is, Chuck," Jean said, "you blew off steam to the sheriff. Your own words could hang you when they're repeated at your trial."

Chuck had nothing to say as he followed Jean into the office.

Colter's sixguns and shell belts were hanging on a wall peg and Chuck appropriated them, buckling them quickly around his lean waist. Jean walked over to the desk and blew out the night lamp.

In the darkness, Chuck again reached for her and pulled her into his arms. She tried to break away, whispering desperately; "Our horses are in the side alley, darling. We've got to get out of here."

"Does your dad know about this?" he whispered.

She was crying now, her auburn head cradled under the hard angle of his jaw.

"No. No, Chuck. I couldn't tell him, when I kissed him good night over at the hotel, that I might never see him again! We'll go far away, Chuck. We can be married at Tres Cruces tomorrow. No matter what happens, we'll be together, for always. Does anything else matter? Giving up the Flying W, giving up Texas?"

Chuck's throat ached intolerably. He

wanted to start crying like a kid. Instead he let go of Jean and walked over to the street door, opening it a crack and peering out on the moonlit vista of Main Street.

Nothing moved out there. No cowponies were at the hitch-racks. The saloons and honkytonks were dark, locked up for the night, as they always were at this hour, two forty-five in the morning. A night lamp burned in the lobby of the Drover's Hotel across the street, and another at the Wells Fargo stage stand, further down. Otherwise, Badwater was asleep.

He was thinking, that note of Gorum's was all lies. He hadn't talked to Jean, hadn't made a deal. Even that business of bribing Hard Luck was intended to make me walk out of here into a trap.

Sure, that was how it had to be. If Babcock hadn't been paid to pull the trigger, then Steve Robbins would have been planted in an alley out there and would cover the jail door.

"Did anyone see you come in here, Jean?" he asked, without turning around.

"No," she said, "I'm sure no one did. Not a soul was in the street when I left the hotel."

He grinned in the darkness. Bless Jean, she had planned everything out, even to the getaway horses stashed in the alley next to the jail. But it wouldn't work. Walk out of this door, and both of them would be targets in the moonlight. Bee Gorum wouldn't be above killing even the woman he loved if he figured out the reason for Jean's engineering a jail break tonight.

"Listen to me, Jean," Chuck whispered, kissing her cheek as she moved up close to him. "I'll tell you why you've got to stay forted up right here in this jail office until I come to get you."

HE TOLD her then of old Babcock's proposition, and pressed Gorum's note in her hand to keep for him. He knew from the sudden violence of her trembling that what he said made sense to her.

"Then what do you intend to do?" she asked, making an effort at composure.

Chuck loosened his guns in their holsters. He said grimly, "I'm supposed to head for the Wells Fargo wagon yard to meet Gorum. But I don't think I'll play the cards the way he dealt them. The first thing I want to do is make sure Colonel Slankard's all right. I have a feeling that his life is in as much danger tonight as mine is."

"Colonel Slankard?" Jean asked, surprised. "Just because I saw him arguing with Bee? Why, what do you mean?"

There wasn't time now to tell her about Slankard's will. As the minutes ticked past, Chuck Finley became obsessed with the idea that the sooner he got to Slankard's room over in the Drover's Hotel, the better it would be for the Lazy L boss.

The ring of keys jingled in Chuck's fist as he locked the street door and bolted it. "You stay in this office," he said. "You have a gun. Don't let anybody in, not even the sheriff. Above all, don't open that door to Bee or Steve Robbins, in case either of them show up to see how Babcock's making out with me."

He kissed her swiftly, fiercely, and then headed for the bullpen door. Groping after him in the darkness, Jean called in a whisper, "Chuck! Chuck, where are you going?"

"Out the back way, where I'll have shadows to cover me. I don't think the Lazy L will have the back way covered. They're counting too much on old Bad Luck's wheedling."

It took what seemed to him to be an eternity to locate the proper key to open the back door of the jail, at the end of the cellblock corridor. This end of the jail was in deep shadow, for the moon was out of sight behind the false front of the wheelwright's shop next door. He eased through the door, locked it behind him for Jean's protection, and pocketed the keys.

It would be suicidal, of course, to attempt to cross the open street to reach the hotel where Colonel Slankard was spending the night. Instead, he slipped along the back of the wheelwright's shop and crossed back lots until he was a block away from the jail.

The recurrent thought kept running through his head, Gorum knows the colonel is waiting in town to see his old friend and lawyer, Harley Owens, when the eight o'clock stage pulls in tomorrow. He knows the colonel wants to change his will, cutting Gorum off,

and leaving everything he owns to Owens.

A cold shudder ran down Chuck's spine at the thought that maybe he was already too late. Gorum's chances of inheriting the Lazy L depended on Slankard's death—presumably from natural causes—tonight! Chuck Finley could only hope and pray that Gorum had been so preoccupied with his murder trap for him, Chuck, that he had delayed giving his attention to Colonel Slankard.

He followed the inky gut of an alley between a saloon and a store to reach Main Street. In the open he would have to chance being a target for a bushwhack bullet, but he doubted if Steve Robbins or Gorum would be looking for him from this direction.

No alien sound broke the night's hush as Chuck Finley crossed the street and headed down another alley. Then, turning sharply, he broke into a run, skirting the rear of a row of buildings until he reached the kitchen door of the Drover's Hotel.

There were twenty-odd rooms in the hotel. The only way to find out which one Colonel Slankard occupied was to ask the night clerk, Uncle Mose Farley. He would be in the lobby.

Chuck let himself in through the back door and hurried down a corridor to where the night light gleamed in the deserted lobby. Loud snores directed him to Uncle Mose's cot behind the desk. The old man was sound asleep, but the open register was on the desk.

Hastily Chuck scanned the signatures of the guests who had signed in during the day. Gifford Romaine was in Room F, downstairs, with Jean in Room G adjoining. Bee Gorum was sharing Room 22 upstairs with Steve Robbins.

Then he found what he was hunting for—Colonel Tom Slankard's arthritic signature, indicating that he was in Room 20, next to his foreman.

COLD dread tightened Chuck Finley's belly muscles as he headed up the stairs. As he came in view of the dimly-lit upper hall, he suddenly froze. One of the doors midway down the hall opened, and a silhouetted figure stepped out and moved toward him.

He crouched down, undecided what to do. Some hotel guest was on the prowl, maybe coming downstairs for a drink or something. It was too late to avoid being seen here on the stairs. However, the prowler didn't come as far as the stairs, but halted in front of the next door on the left and inserted a key in the lock. The man glanced up and down the hall, then vanished inside the room.

Chuck went on up the stairs, glancing at the number on the first door at the head of the flight. Sixteen. Colonel Slankard's room, then, would be the third down the hall.

A bright light blazed up in Chuck Finley's mind at that moment, exploding in his consciousness like a bomb. The third door down was the one he had seen that hotel guest unlock and enter. Snatching a gun from its holster, Chuck headed down the hall and came to a halt in front of Number 20. It was slightly ajar.

Maybe I'm too late. That thought was searing through Chuck's brain as he kicked open the door and lunged inside. Lamplight streaming dimly into the room illuminated a shocking picture.

Big Steve Robbins was on Colonel Slankard's bed, which stood beside the doorway, straddling the sleeping man under the blankets. Robbins, gripping a feather pillow, was crushing it down over Slankard's head, the weight of his body pinioning the old man's convulsively struggling body.

For a frozen instant, Robbins stared up at Chuck Finley. Then he dropped the pillow, and his right hand stabbed for a gun.

"No you don't, Steve!"

Chuck hurled himself at the big puncher, throwing up his Colt for a down-clubbing blow at Robbins's head. Gunmetal grazed the man's skull, and the front sight tore a gash in his scalp.

The next instant Chuck, seizing Robbins by a handful of shirt, was hauling him bodily off the bed. He flung Steve Robbins to the floor with such a resounding thud that the whole room shook.

IN HIS underwear, Colonel Slankard was struggling to sit up, clinging to the brass rods of the head of the bedstead. His face was ghastly pale, and he was fighting for breath.

A bottle of whisky was on a bedside stand

at Slankard's elbow. Chuck holstered his gun, snatched up the liquor bottle and a tumbler, and sloshed out a stiff drink, holding the glass to the old rancher's lips.

Slankard gulped down the whisky, his whole skinny frame wracked with convulsive shudders. Stark horror was still in Chuck. Only too well he was aware that a man with a bad heart might pass out on him, die before his very eyes as a result of any sudden shock. It would be a miracle if he could survive an ordeal such as the one through which Colonel Slankard had just passed.

"Chuck," Slankard gasped, "what happened? Did I have an attack?"

Chuck realized then that the old soldier had no idea that his attacker, his would-be killer, was sprawled on the floor out of sight. Slankard probably had been asleep when Robbins had crushed the smothering pillow over his face. He could have passed out temporarily, without knowing this smothering attack was any different from others he had endured.

The damage was done now, though, and anything that could be added to it in the way of shock could be no worse. And it was vitally necessary that Colonel Slankard know the truth. Chuck knew he had to take the chance.

"Colonel," he panted, "Bee Gorum aimed to kill you tonight. He sent Steve Robbins to smother you in your sleep, making it look like a heart attack had finished you off."

"Robbins, eh?" Slankard said. "Where is he now?"

Chuck made a gesture toward the floor.

Colonel Slankard crawled out of bed and stood beside it, staring down at the familiar upturned face of one of his own punchers. The whisky was taking hold now, and the oldster's nerves were settling down. His Civil War spirit seemed to assert itself.

"The dirty lobos!" he said harshly. "Gorum knew the only way he could ever get the Lazy L was to get me out of the way before I had a chance to see Harley Owens in the morning."

Slankard's gunbelt was hanging over a bedpost. As he glanced at it, Chuck Finley saw and understood. Lifting the colonel's Peacemaker .45 from leather, he handed it to the old rancher. Then he reached down, grabbed Steve Robbins by the armpits, and hoisted him to a sitting position on the bed. With no gentle hand he rammed the neck of the whisky bottle between the cowhand's lips, forcing a drink down him.

Robbins blinked and sputtered, then came to with a start, to reach up and finger the bloody welt over his left ear. When he caught sight of the sixgun Slankard was holding on him, terror gripped him.

"There are two things Robbins can clear up for us, Colonel," Chuck Finley said. "That rustler raid in Talus Canyon six weeks ago, and Orin Gaylord's murder night before last. He knows the answers. I want him to do some talking for your benefit."

Slankard's horny thumb eared the sixgun hammer to full cock. "You tried to smother a sick old man in his sleep, Steve," he said. "That gives me every right in the world to put a slug in your guts. You want to talk your way out of it?"

Steve Robbins's eyes rolled in their sockets. "I'll talk," he mumbled. "It isn't me you want, boss. It's Bee Gorum. He's had you marked for murder ever since you willed him the spread last winter."

A sick disillusionment was stamped on Slankard's face. "Go on, Steve. I know you're too dumb to have figured out any such scheme yourself. I realize you're just a pawn in Bee's hands. Keep talking."

Robbins's gaze shifted to Chuck Finley, who was standing by with thumbs thrust under shell belts. Something in Chuck's bleak eyes told the Lazy L man his only hope was in coming clean.

"Bee wanted Chuck's land," Robbins said. "He figured when you were gone, Colonel, he'd own the Lazy L, and he was figuring likewise to marry Jean Romaine, and then the Flying W would be as good as his. But even all that in sight didn't satisfy him. He wanted Chuck's land, too. He's a greasy son."

FINLEY nodded grimly. He had already figured out this deal, but he had wanted Slankard to hear it from Robbins's own lips.

"So," Robbins went on resignedly, "he heard about Chuck being over on the Circle F.

He made a deal with a gang of wetback Mexicans who were hiding out in the Yellow Hills, and they pulled off that rustler raid. He'd already suckered you into riding out to Talus Canyon that night by telling you a yarn about seeing strange riders sizing up our feeders."

Slankard nodded grimly. "I see. So he had the Mexicans pull the raid, knowing the ruckus would bring Chuck over the ridge to investigate."

"Yeah. It was Gorum's Springfield that cut down Pete Collier that night, Colonel. Collier wasn't in on Gorum's plans, but when Gorum found out that Pete was wise to them, Gorum had to get rid of that wrangler. And he decided the best way to kill two birds with one stone was to pin that shooting on Chuck here. He couldn't risk a plain ambush on Chuck. It would cause too much talk, and folks would get to wondering too much. So he made plans to get Chuck strung up legally."

Chuck cut in sharply," How about that bag of Mexican money the sheriff found in my cantle pouch before the trial?"

Robbins shrugged. "Gorum planted it there, of course. You guessed that yourself."

Chuck tugged out his watch. It was twelve minutes after three. In two more minutes, Bee Gorum would be expecting him to show up at the Wells Fargo wagon yard.

"Just one more thing, Steve," he said. "Might as well make a clean breast of it while you're at it. Tell Colonel Slankard about Gaylord and you trying to bushwhack me night before last. You doubled back and picked up the blacksmith's body, didn't you?"

Robbins nodded. "You were right about it. We couldn't afford to have Gaylord's carcass found on Flying W soil. Sure, Colonel, Gorum and I made up that Arch Rock bushwhacking story we told."

Colonel Slankard rasped, "Where's Bee now?"

Robbins hesitated, glancing at Chuck before he shrugged and said, "Reckon Chuck knows the answer to that. Otherwise he wouldn't be out of jail right now."

Surprise arched Slankard's cottony brows. He hadn't even vaguely realized before his life had been saved by a man who was supposed to be locked up in jail.

Chuck moved toward the door. "You ride herd on Robbins, Colonel," he said. "I have an invitation to meet Bee Gorum. It looks like maybe I'll have two notches in my guns, after all, because I don't reckon Gorum's going to let me take him alive."

As Chuck Finley reached the door, Colonel Slankard called after him in a somber voice, "One minute, Chuck. I've got something to tell you."

Chuck turned. "Yeah?"

"I told Gorum I was going to change my will," the Lazy L owner said. "With my heart in the shape it's in, I know I won't be around long. Like I told you, I'm aiming to meet Harley Owens when his stage pulls in. And when he fixes up my will, instead of Gorum's name, I'm going to have him put in your name and Jean's. It'll be a wedding present from an old friend."

Emotion choked Chuck Finley. He said, "We can talk about that later, Colonel. Right now you keep a close watch on Robbins here. We'll need his testimony."

Finley ducked out into the hall, went to the rear, and left the hotel by way of fire escape steps in the back.

REACHING the ground, he still kept to the rear of buildings, in the shadows, until the looming shapes of Conestoga wagons, discarded stagecoaches, and other junk told him he was approaching the wagon yard behind the Wells Fargo stage station. Chuck moved with infiinite caution as he drew closer. Somewhere in those shadows Bee Gorum would be crouched, sixgun in hand.

How would Gorum expect him to show up? Coming directly from the jail, the logical route would be straight to the stagecoach office and down the alley to the wagon yard. That alley seemed to be the logical spot for a trap.

A fine line of sweat broke out on Chuck's upper lip as he worked his way along the adobe wall of Tony's Saloon, next door to the express office. There was no way of figuring out whether Gorum would be at the Main Street end of the alley, where he could watch the jail, or whether he would be back in the wagon yard where the escaped prisoner was supposed to pick up a horse for his getaway.

When Chuck reached the corner of Tony's Saloon he cuffed back his Stetson and peered up the alley toward Main Street. A night lantern hanging under the wooden awning of the Wells Fargo depot gave him a clear view of the hundred-foot length of that alley. He saw no sign of Bee Gorum.

Chuck moved away, following a stone fence along the outside of the wagon yard. At the far end he paused, catching sight of a saddle horse, his own Flying W mount, hitched to the back of a discarded prairie schooner.

There was the bait for Bee Gorum's trap!

Chuck picked up a pebble, took aim, and threw it over the wagon yard wall. It struck his pony on the rump. The horse snorted and wheeled around, pawing the ground.

Crouched down below the stone wall in the deep shade of a tamarisk, Chuck called in a low voice, "Bee? You around?"

For a slow count of ten there was no sound. Then Chuck saw a slight movement in an ancient Concord stagecoach, alongside the prairie schooner where the horse was tied.

The door of the Concord opened and Gorum stepped down to the ground. He was not holding a gun.

"Where are you?" he called softly. "I have guns and a grubsack and money here for you."

"Over here, Bee."

GORUM started violently, his shoulder dropping as he spun around, searching for the source of that steely voice. Then he saw Chuck Finley climbing onto the stone wall.

"Get your arms up, Bee," Chuck Finley said quietly.

Gorum said tautly, "You wouldn't double-cross me, would you? After the risk I've run in getting you out of jail?"

Finley said grimly, "Thought you might be interested to know that Steve didn't kill the colonel. Right this minute he's over in the hotel, with Slankard's gun covering him. And Robbins talked, Gorum. He talked plenty."

Gorum seemed too paralyzed to move or speak, but Chuck Finley went on inexorably, "And it wasn't Bad Luck who got me out of jail, Bee. It was Jean. We're going to be married today. And not on a shoestring, either. Colonel Slankard's going to deed us the Lazy L."

Bee Gorum's arms, elevated to hat-brim height, came down with blurring speed. Even as Chuck brought his own gun around to meet the threat, he saw the moonlight blur on gunmetal as Gorum got both his Colts out of leather and up too fast for the eye to follow.

Flame spat from the muzzles of Gorum's Colts, and his slugs slammed into the stone wall on either side of Chuck's dangling boot. Chuck's thumb tripped his gun hammer then. He felt the gun buck savagely against the crotch of his thumb, and momentarily his eyes were blurred by clouding gunsmoke.

When the air cleared, Gorum was no longer on his feet. He was sprawled in a sitting position, his head pillowed on the hub of one of the Concord's wheels.

Smoke fumed in twin spirals from the muzzles of his guns, which lay on the packed dirt of the wagon yard. Blood was gushing crimson from a bullet hole in the center of Gorum's forehead.

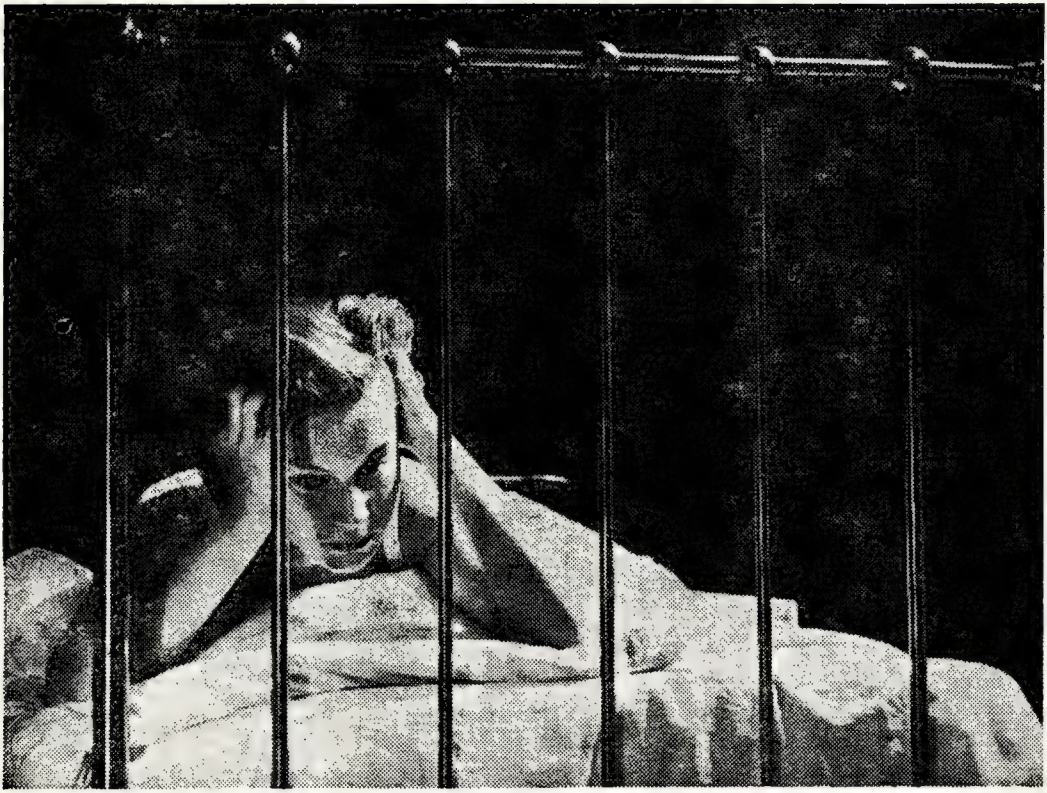
The promise of dawn was a pink pulse in the east as Chuck Finley emerged from the alley between Tony's Saloon and the stage office, and headed across Main Street toward the jail. A light from an upstairs window of the Drover's Hotel indicated where Colonel Slankard was still covering Steve Robbins.

Across the street from the hotel, Chuck Finley climbed the steps of the sheriff's office and rapped on the panels. He got no answer until he said, "It's all right to open up, Jean. It's Chuck."

He heard a bolt scrape in the socket, and the door opened. Jean Romaine, showing the strain of her half-hour's vigil, came straight into his arms.

"It's all over, Jean," Chuck whispered. "It's a long story, but Gorum's dead and the colonel's all right. He even has a wedding present lined up for us."

Jean's eyes were wet as she kissed him. "Don't forget," she said, "you're remanded to my custody, Chuck—for a lot longer than the sheriff said. You didn't know it was a life sentence, did you, darling?"



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41P

WILL'S WORLD would be empty if Laura left

him . . . but he'd rather see her in another

man's arms than facing an Indian attack. . . .

DANGER IN

In Laura's tense hands the old saddle gun looked strange

THE HILLS

By FRED GROVE

THE wedding crowd was small, but then Cedar Gap itself formed only a struggling clutter upon the dry, brown prairie. They were mostly just a handful of rough, sun-blackened men, uncomfortable in fresh shirts, and their plain-faced women in whose moist eyes seemed to live once more all the hopes dimmed over the harsh years.

As the Reverend Mather finished saying the solemn words, Will Chisum made awkward work of kissing his bride. At once the women crowded in to kiss and hug Laura and to cry a little, for in her they saw themselves at the beginning of their own marriages.

Outside in the blistering sun, Hap Bristow pumped Will's hand a second time and said, "While the womenfolk are telling Laura how to handle a no-account cuss like you, let's drink to the happy years."

Will glanced around for Laura. She stood slender and poised as she chatted with the women, her fair cheeks glowing faintly and her green eyes smiling politely. The sight made him proud. He could never look at her without feeling a deep astonishment over his luck. Then, for no reason at all, he found himself wondering how a town woman would take to harsh ranch life.

He beat down the thought and said cheerfully, "All right."

Bristow, a round, affable man who seemed to foresee a future for Cedar Gap that others did not, waved at the knot of stiff men. In unison they stepped forward to the saloon.

"Set 'em up," Bristow told the barkeep.

But Will shoved his own money across first. "I'm buying today."

Grinning, Bristow raised his glass and murmured, "Well, here's to Will and Laura—the best of luck, and a dozen strong boys." Then he tossed off his drink.

Everybody laughed. Rollie Latham slapped Will on the back. Joining in sheepishly, Will felt the blood climb to his face. He was setting his empty glass down when he took notice of Big Jim Fallon, his drink untouched. Will pretended not to notice and turned to go, only to check up as Bristow's voice rose on a note of surprise.

"Aren't you drinking, Jim?"

A stillness fell across the good-natured talk.

"Why not?" answered Fallon, momentarily off-guard. He drank and stood back, his powerful conceit showing as he swung himself erect and self-assured. "I was just thinking about how close Will's place is to Apache country. Take my advice, friend, and keep a gun handy."

"They are a mite proddy," Will conceded, "but I've had no real trouble. I don't expect any as long as I stay on my side of the range."

Fallon's eyes flashed a faint but unmistakable malice, and Will knew what had soured him. He'd been one of Laura's suitors. His attentions increased after Laura Emory's father, a drifting man who'd never found his green pastures, had died soon upon coming to Cedar Gap to open a law office.

Bristow threw in a warning glance. Fallon appeared not to see or care. "It's a pretty rough life on a town woman—or any woman," Fallon said, quietly.

A hard knot began to ball up inside Will. He managed to keep his tone steady, but he was choosing his words with care. "Are you sure that's what you're trying to tell me?"

Fallon shrugged.

"If there's something in your craw, speak up."

"I just said—"

"Say it now, or shut up," Will answered, irritated with himself for having let Fallon spoil the day.

A smile creased Fallon's heavy lips, but there was no warmth in it. "No hard feelings, I hope."

Will said nothing, and was relieved when Bristow put in, a bit hurriedly, "Time for Will to go. It's a long ride home." As they turned up the plank walk, Bristow continued amiably, "Cedar Gap's set for a school next fall. All we need is a teacher. I was hoping Laura might help us the first term. I understand she taught some, back in Missouri. There's plenty time for you to think all over, though."

"Don't count on her, Hap. She can't be both places."

AROUND late afternoon of that day, Will Chisum drove the light spring wagon to the top of a low rise. Reining in, he looked down and across. It was a scene that never tired him, bleak as it was this dry year.

Close in stood the few scattered sheds, the corral, and the tiny adobe house. Past the buildings rose the foothills, dark with cedar, and onward massed the purple bulk of the mountains—Apache country. Will was glad that he had stuck it out here, for now he had something to offer Laura.

"There it is," he said. "Home."

Turning as he spoke, he was struck by her in-drawn gasp of breath. A moment passed before she answered, and even then he could sense the struggle going on inside her.

"Yes, Will. Of course."

He drove on, nursing his silent thoughts. It came to him for the first time that he didn't really know this woman, that they were almost strangers.

By the time they reached the house, Will's doubts were forgotten. When she passed before the door, where he'd burned a C7 into the frame, he said proudly, "Our brand, Laura."

She gave him a brief, humoring smile.

As he finished taking in her valises and the barrel-topped trunk, he said in apology, "It's not much, I know. But I'll help you make it shine."

She stood quietly, powerless to mask her disappointment as she sized up the unbelievable sparseness. The blackened cook stove had one broken leg, propped up by a rock upon the tamped dirt floor. There was a plank table, rawhide chairs, and a crude pine cupboard. The place looked clean, but that was about all you could say for it, he decided with misgivings, in the light of a woman's presence.

"Bedroom's off here," he said, unable to hide a certain self-consciousness.

It occurred to him that she hadn't uttered a single word since entering the house. When she went to the bedroom entrance, her long skirts rustling, he wanted to comfort her. His hand brushed up, hesitated, fell awkwardly away. In that moment he was ashamed of what he must show her.

He sucked in a deep, hoping breath while he saw her glance move slowly over the graceless pine bedstead he'd made, replacing his

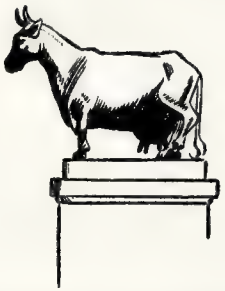
single bunk; then to the broken mirror hanging above two upright wooden crates, which he'd meant as a dresser for her.

"Some curtains would help," she told him, trying to be cheerful.

"Sure would," he agreed. "We'll get some, next time we're in town."

All at once, as if the bareness had crushed her, she stared down with trembling lips, resigned. Her distress swept aside his awkwardness for once. In an instant he reached her, took her in his arms, and patted the dark head leaning against his shoulder.

"I know it looks bleak. But we can make it bright, just the way you want it."



BOVINE BLESSING

By S. OMAR BARKER

Cows should be held
in high esteem,
For udderwise no milk,
no cream!

She looked up at him with brimming eyes. "Will, I'm ashamed of myself, taking on like this. It's just that I . . . didn't expect it, I guess. But I'll try. I promise. I'll make you a good wife."

He kissed her for that and, long moments after, when his head came up, the room seemed to swim in a glow he'd never noticed before. He heard himself saying, to comfort her, "There are a few steers I've been aiming to sell. We'll get you some things."

But the steers he had in mind for market had vanished from the range. They had been stolen, he figured, until he found them—bloated carcasses around an alkali water hole he'd carefully fenced off. A cold fury shook him as he studied the cut wire. He scouted the area, but lost the horse tracks in a driving dust storm.

That was in early spring. By June last year's drought had returned in even greater force. He kept moving his small herd, shifting from one shrinking hole to another, riding far and late. He always managed to reach home at night, although it often meant traveling long after dark, and sometimes it would have been more convenient to stay at a line shack, or to bunk in with a neighbor.

On a burning August day he and Laura made one of their infrequent trips to town. As usual, Big Jim Fallon stepped from behind his store counter with a show of manners. His cutting eyes swept over Laura in a fashion that Will didn't like. It was a sort of pecking, undressing appraisal, as if Fallon were reading all the signs of hard times—Laura's work-reddened hands, her worn dress, and her face sunburned like a man's.

"How're things out Chisum way?" Fallon asked, his eyes still busy.

"Dry," Will shot back, and handed him a meager list of supplies. It rankled, having to trade with Fallon, but a man had no choice. Fallon owned the only general merchandise store in Cedar Gap, in addition to having interests in several hill-country ranches.

"Apaches quiet, I hope?"

"Quiet," Will said.

FALLON, after calling a clerk to fill the order, continued with a half smile, "Hap Bristow is still looking for a school teacher." His attention was fully upon Laura; he ignored Will.

"We're not interested," Will interrupted coldly, but he saw that Laura was.

"Oh." Fallon acted surprised and disappointed. "Bristow told me you might be," he went on, eyes lingering on Laura.

"Hap mentioned it once," Will said, "but I told him no. It's still no."

Fallon spread his heavy hands in a gesture of injured innocence. "Just trying to help."

"We don't need your help."

"But, Will, maybe I could!" Laura's words came in an excited rush. "I taught before, in Missouri. And we could use—"

Will's stare stopped her before she could finish the part that stung a man's pride. "You couldn't ride back and forth," he countered reasonably. "You'd have to stay in town."

He realized that he was flushing foolishly before her and Fallon. It angered him, and he really suddenly knew that he didn't want Laura in town, near Fallon.

"Oh, well, there's time yet," Fallon said. He turned to the counter and remarked casually, yet deliberately, "just got some new dress material in, Laura. Would you like to see it?"

For a moment Laura considered the bolts of bright cloth. She showed no longing, but Will knew of her need. Then, quickly, her pride seemed to rise.

Her chin tilted up and he felt proud when she laughed and said, "Thank you, Jim, but what in the world would I do with more dresses? Will's bought me more now than one woman could ever wear."

Leaving the store with their supplies, Will said, "I'm sorry, Laura. It's not what a man *wants* to do for a woman, it's what he's able to do."

She took his arm as they strolled toward the wagon yard. "Never mind, Will. It'll rain one of these days—that's certain!"

He chuckled, deeply relieved and pleased. She'd used one of his own dogged expressions, pitched it right back at him. But he was conscious of her thoughtful silence as they followed the wagon road home, moving across a heat-laden land, gritty with dust. And he knew, intuitively, that she was thinking of the school job.

Scarcely a week later, he was surprised to find Fallon's stocking-legged sorrel in the yard. During the dry, punishing days, Will had all but forgotten the big man. Now, riding up, he saw Laura standing in the doorway. Fallon, his white hat off, was turning his hungry gaze all over her.

Laura's eyes were lively, as if Fallon had just said something that made her laugh. When she turned, Will recognized an animation he hadn't seen in her in a long time. The change hit him with an accusing sharpness. These hard months had taken more from her than he'd realized. He dismounted slowly. He felt out of place, almost an intruder.

"Company, Will." Laura sounded pleased. "Jim stopped on his way to Rollie Latham's." There was a slight tightness in her voice when she added, "He says the school job is still open."

"Bristow asked me to leave word," Fallon explained, "since I was riding over to Latham's to close a deal for his place. He's selling out."

"Rollie?"

Fallon nodded. "That's right. I'm giving him pretty good terms, considering the poor shape of things."

Will was too stunned to say anything. Latham, a good neighbor and an efficient cowman, was no harder hit than himself. Yet he was selling. It was a bad sign, since it showed how all the foothills ranchers were feeling.

Just then Laura said, "Dinner's waiting, Will."

He put up his horse and returned to the house, turning over Fallon's remarks in his mind. He entered into what seemed a snapped-off silence, so he guessed Fallon must have been talking school teaching again. Will ate slowly, the food seeming dull and tasteless.

A subtle excitement flushed Laura's cheeks. She'd never looked prettier, and she chatted constantly during the meal. Fallon's eyes seldom strayed from her.

"Hate to see Latham go," Fallon said, when the talk drifted to weather and cattle, but his tone belied the words. "Could be this Apache scare, too. He has a big family."

"Scare?" Startled, Will looked up from his plate.

Fallon leaned back. "A freighter got shot up, other side of Fort Llano, day before yesterday."

"It wouldn't take much to stir up trouble," Will acknowledged. "But Llano's a long way from here."

"It is," Fallon agreed, rising.

Except, Will saw, reddening, mentioning Apaches made another argument for Laura to take the school job.

In the yard, when Fallon was mounted to go, he said off-handedly to Laura, "Oh, yes. Bristow said he'd be out about noon tomorrow to talk to you. If you're interested, he'll take you in. It'll give you time to get settled in town before school starts."

Before he thought, Will's flat voice leaped out. "Let's get this straight, Fallon. Laura has a job—here. She won't be teaching school this fall."

"I'm just passing the word, that's all," Fallon answered, unruffled, and rode off.

LAURA looked as though she'd been slapped. Head up, she whirled and strode rapidly to the house. Will followed slowly, all knotted and bitter inside.

She stood away from him, her turned back like a wall between them. He closed the door, tensed for her to speak. Instead, he was surprised when her voice came quietly, weighted and hurt in a way that tore into him.

"Will, I'm only trying to help us. The job isn't much, but it would help get us through. You've said yourself that we're burned out this year."

"But not that bad." A harsh, stubborn bitterness found its way into his voice. "This is a terrible year, the worst I can remember, but we'll make it. Been worse times than this, I reckon."

She turned, a persuasive pleading in her green eyes. "Why else do you think I want the job, but to help us?"

Will shook his head. "Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I want you here—with me—and not in town."

He longed suddenly to tell her that he only fought so hard to save the ranch because of her. But an obstinate doggedness took hold of him. Thus, when he spoke, the words sounded wrong. But he could not help himself.

"Besides, Laura, a man has his pride."

Her cheeks flamed. "I have a little of that, too! What if people do say I'm working in town? It's for us, isn't it? Nothing to be ashamed of!" Her eyes raked him up and down. "Look at you! Worn thin as a drifter, riding day and night. How do you think I feel when I can't help you?"

"But you are helping, just being here."

She flung away, facing the dusty window, unseeing eyes upon the brown, burned-out distances. "That's not enough," she replied, with a stubbornness all her own.

Everything got twisted inside Will. He spoke on impulse, bitterly. "Guess I've been blind. I'm just beginning to see things as they really are. Never thought of it before. It would be easier on you in town, all right. You could have some of the things I can't buy you. And there'd be Jim Fallon."

"Will!"

She came around swiftly, an indescribable pain deep in her eyes. Her face was pale. Her breasts heaved and fell under the thin, washed-out dress. Then a furious color flooded the white column of her neck, flared up through her cheeks.

"Laura." He took a step toward her. Too late he realized how unfair and hard he had been.

"Don't touch me!"

Laura shrank back. Her eyes were twin points of loathing anger pinning him in his tracks, shutting him out. In the same motion her dark head swept up, proud and resolved. She turned on her heel and went quickly to the bedroom.

Will stepped to the door, ashamed and suffering for her hurt. He called, "Laura," and stayed motionless, undecided.

"Stay out of here!"

The full weight of everything he had said rolled over him again. He could hear her broken sobbing, stifled, as if she didn't want him to hear. The sounds were as sharp knives, twisting and torturing him deep down. Something told him not to go in. He pressed a hand to his eyes and, turning slowly, left the house.

Dust gritted into his skin, the burning wind with it. He lifted his face to the angry, bloodshot sky, wondering why any sane man tried to ranch this forsaken land.

Not until he saw the corral did the beginning of reason catch up. A bay horse colt frisked inside. Taking a halter from the shed, Will killed what was left of the day by fooling with the colt. It was near dark when he moved reluctantly to the dimly-lighted house.

He stepped into emptiness. The table was set for supper, as always, except that Laura wasn't there to greet him. He missed that already—the gentleness curving into her full lips as he'd come through the door, the wonderful magic of her suppleness completely against him.

Faint sounds registered. Only now did he

realize that he'd been standing several moments, head down, lost in a bitter storm of regret. He looked up. Another lamp burned in the bedroom. He could hear Laura's quick, back-and-forth steps on the tamped floor, the thin rustle of clothing.

He moved across the room. At the door he glanced in, and was shaken when he saw the worn valises and her barrel-topped trunk. Laura kept on with her packing, not looking up.

Again, something stopped him. "Laura," he began, searching for the careful, mending phrases and unable to find them. "I—well—" He was stumbling, lost, an awkward man to whom easy words had always come hard.

"You've already said it, Will. Don't bother to come in."

"But—"

Laura straightened without facing him, her hands clenched in a folded print dress. Her shoulders stiffened.

His boots scraped the floor.

"No, Will!" Her voice, cold and determined, checked him like a blow in the face. And still she had not turned.

He could tell then that she was leaving, that nothing he might say would stop her.

A touch of his own pride welled up. Voiceless, he wheeled back to the kitchen. The brisk packing noises were renewed, the short, forceful steps. He ate his supper, cleared the table, and sat smoking in silence. Long afterward, he heard her blow out the lamp. He caught the brushing whisper of her clothing as she undressed for bed, then the soft movements of her body when she lay down.

She seemed to toss restlessly for a short space. In him rose the unreasoning hope that she might yet call to him. But the silence ran on, heavy and unbroken. Already the house seemed empty.

SIGHING heavily, Will found a blanket the spread it upon the kitchen floor. In the quiet darkness he thought of the solitary days ahead, of the house black and still when he rode in late. Even when, finally, he fell into a half-dozing sleep, he could not shut out the image of Laura in the yellow glow of the lamp, and the unswerving line of her slim shoulders turned away from him.

Will was up before daylight, making a fire and listening for sounds from the bedroom. He heard Laura stirring as he left the house and paced to the horse shed, the drag of a sleepless night low and heavy within him. He asked himself how you said goodbye to a woman, and decided he had no answer.

Returning to the house, he found breakfast waiting. Laura was a silent, inflexible shape across from him, hollow-eyed, drawn, and yet willful. Without a word, Will took a chair. The food seemed to stick in his throat. They ate in silence. Will sensed that everything had been said between them.

Soon finished, he stood and reached for hat and gunbelt. He was buckling up when his eyes fell across the old saddle gun he kept here for Laura. It brought to mind Fallon's Apache talk.

Will mulled over the talk for a moment, rejected it, and finally said, "I'll be back before you leave, unless Hap comes early. I'm moving the bunch to another water hole."

A faint interest built in her eyes, then fled. That was all.

He paused at the door, feeling rather than seeing a tremor of emotion in her. But when he searched her cool eyes, they met his without changing. It was as if an invisible breath separated them, a gap words could not bridge.

He swallowed and said, "Well—" while his thoughts roiled. If she'd just say something!

The silence hung. He stepped outside, aware that she held the door open. As he struggled against his pride and started to turn, he heard the door close.

He saddled up in a dull fog of dejection, his motions automatic. Coming to the first low hill, he turned in the saddle and laid his lingering glance upon the house. In the raw light it seemed more like a hut than a house—a miserable place to bring a town woman.

His eyes narrowed. He couldn't be positive but, for a fleeting second, he thought he saw a face at a window. Another instant and he decided the distance had fooled him. It was just an illusion of his wishful thinking.

Now a new and jarring thought hit him. Though he hadn't known it at the moment, he'd already said goodbye. If Hap Bristow, a punctual man, came on time, Will couldn't possibly move his cattle and return by noon.

The realization hurried him westward, into the bleak hills, and past the town trail. During a measureless period he was just vaguely conscious of the mesquite country he traveled. He was oppressed by an unbelievable loneliness.

Toward mid-morning he reached his destination, a puckered pool of stagnant water rimmed by cracked mud. While the gelding drank, he sent his gaze roving over the brown stretches for his bunch of mother cows and calves. The lack of any movement seemed odd and he peered again, feeling a vague bewilderment.

Scowling, he swung up onto a hill, from which he could scan the surrounding range to the distant mountains. He stood in the stirrups and took a long, squinting look. A mocking emptiness filled his eyes. He stayed unmoving a full minute, trying to figure where the cattle had gone. Stumped, he jogged back to the water hole and started looking for tracks.

There were plenty of prints where stock had wandered in and out, milling for water, but they made no particular sense. Working deliberately, he began a wide circling. Minutes later, in the direction of the mountains, he found where the tracks bunched and moved westward. Among them were a set of prints from shod hoofs. His uneasiness deepened. West meant the reservation, off bounds for cowmen. Yet Apaches seldom rode shod ponies.

Anger burned deeply in him as he saw the trail's intent. The hills grew bolder, higher, black with cedar clumps. Not long afterward he smelled the pungent breath of pines. The tracks kept straight, cutting toward the beginning stands of tall timber and rich meadows.

In a while he rode upon Apache grass. From that moment he advanced carefully, alert for small sounds. He crossed a humpbacked ridge and came down into a cool, green meadow.

Almost instantly, he noticed a dark reddish lump on the ground, not fifty feet away. The sight drew him across in a hard lope. One glance was enough. The cow, butchered Apache style, carried a C7 brand. A few live coals still glowed when Will got down.

He stood rock still, in the grip of a sick and helpless anger. Finally he stirred, straddling his horse, and going slowly on, trying to make something out of the scattered tracks.

It came suddenly. One moment the meadow was quiet, with the dark wall of the pines beyond. Then a drumming smote his ears, a swift, savage roll. Will whirled, drawing his heavy Colt.

He saw a knot of riders—wiry, bronzed men, with cloth head bands circling long, stringy hair. Somehow he found that he was spurring for the opposite side of the meadow, back the way he'd come. He heard a high, menacing whoop. A hornet's sound whirred past his head, and there was the flat slap of a rifle. They swept in from his right to cut him off, heels digging their ponies' flanks.

WILL, reining left, ducked low as he snapped a shot. He saw a brown shape pitch downward. The others hauled up violently. In that brief pause, he plunged under the tall pines. He spurred the gelding in long, lunging strides up the ridge. Behind him followed the high-pitched cries. The climb steepened, but he was thankful for the covering timber.

He was nearing the crest when a gun cracked close behind. Jerking, he glimpsed an Apache on a swift pony gaining on him. Both men fired at almost the same time. But Will felt nothing. The Apache shrieked, grabbed at his chest, and rolled from his pony's back.

Not pausing, Will climbed the ridge and slammed down the far side. Pursuit sounds faded, except for scattered yells. He reloaded in motion, realizing that the whole business had taken less than ten minutes.

The feeling of danger held on as he put Apache grass behind and before long came upon the beginning of his own parched range. Until now he'd thought only of the stock he'd lost. Now an instinct pointed him home, and he was aware of a sharp and rising dread. Bristow should have Laura in town by this time. Yet—

A pencil-like line of dust scratched the sunshot distance. Tense and ready, Will watched it grow without changing direction. Pretty soon he could make out one rider. The man came on and presently Will recognized Rollie

Latham, who waved and joined him on the run.

"Apaches, Will!" Latham yelled hoarsely. He was an angular man whose gray eyes looked white against his dust-grimed face as he pulled in his sweaty horse. "I was on my way to warn you. They burned out old man Deakins. Appears like couple of small war parties." Suddenly he stared hard at Will. "Why, you've come from Apache country yourself!"

Briefly, Will told his story.

Latham whistled. "You're lucky at that. I have my folks forted up at Kinder's ranch."

"Jim Fallon was headed your way yesterday," Will said, frowning. "Do you think he made it?"

Latham's dusty eyebrows shot up. "I haven't seen him. But he'll look out for Jim Fallon, if you know what I mean." Latham lifted reins. "Good luck. I'm scooting back to Kinder's."

He was gone before Will could thank him.

Will rode faster, punishing the gelding. He felt an instant relief when at last he cut the town road. Two sets of narrow-rimmed wheel prints—Bristow's buggy coming and returning—marked the trace.

His worry lifted. Laura was gone, in safe hands. The school job had been a good thing after all—except that something seemed dead inside, a part of him missing. He walked the tired horse along the road, loaded down with a mixed reaction of gratitude and aloneness.

He was climbing the low hill just west of the house when he heard the shots, flat and hard against the wind. They shook him out of his dull state. He had the horse running before he knew it.

Going down on a slant, he saw a white man on a stocking-legged sorrel streaking up the road from the house. Four Apaches on surging ponies closed in, whooping and firing their guns, waving their bows. In one glance Will recognized Big Jim Fallon.

The next moments were unpredictable and swiftly violent. An Apache flung up his rifle. Smoke puffed. The sorrel flinched and seemed to go crazy. Wild-eyed, it veered off the road, running raggedly. As suddenly it swapped course and bolted back for the house, straight into the shrieking clump of Apaches.

Will kept rushing in, firing automatically. An Indian pony swerved, riderless. At this new threat the Apaches hesitated in momentary confusion. Even as Will watched, he saw the sorrel stumble. Fallon cleared the saddle, but he just stood there, not shooting. A lean brave swooped in, hatchet raised. Fallon looked paralyzed, hands above his head.

Will winced as the brown arm chopped downward. Fallon fell like an axed steer. Now the other Apaches were swinging on Will. He saw bright stabbing flashes, and felt his horse break stride. Just before he crashed down, he caught the blur of savage, hating faces, closing in.

He struck the ground with a jolting impact. But some instinct of preservation spun him up, and he thumbed back the hammer of his gun and pulled the trigger. The Apaches split up, swarmed in a howling rush.

Something whicked past Will's head. He saw only two faces now in abrupt focus, saw them with a terrible shock of finality. He had one upsurge of thought as the bronzed shapes drove at him—a last gratefulness that Bristow had come for Laura. He took a deep, steadying breath and fired. A great, strangling yell pierced his ear drums. Coppery shoulders and arms fell spread-eagled.

There wasn't time to get the last Indian. He knew that. But still he pivoted and swung the pistol up, body braced. Just then he saw the Apache jerk oddly, an instant before he heard a distant discharge. As the Apache slumped, it came dimly to Will that the bullet wasn't his. He stared as the shape struck sprawling, puffing dust, and then lay motionless. It became quiet all around, as if someone had closed the door on bedlam.

Slowly, an incredible knowledge bit into Will. It yanked him about, and turned his attention to the house. He hardly knew he was running until the door loomed, open and empty. For a breath he felt doubt. Shouldering inside, he stood blinking, uncertain.

It was then that he saw Laura. In her tense hands his old saddle gun looked unseemly and strange. She placed it against the kitchen table and started to tremble. Then she began a half-swaying step toward him. As he caught her hard, her dim voice came muffled against his chest.

"Will—Will—I couldn't leave you."

His throat caught. It took a long swallow before he could speak. "You're all right?"

She could only nod, rubbing her face against him, motions that made him aware of his dirty shirt. Without any warning, she was crying and clinging to him, the length of her supple body pressing convulsively. He patted her dark head and muttered senseless, soothing noises.

She regained her composure and glanced out the door. Quick, she averted her face. He felt her shudder.

"You're not going out there," he said, low and firm. He made a slow motion to go himself, dreading it, when her fingers dug suddenly into his arms.

"Will—he—" She sounded bewildered and perhaps touched with a trace of compassion. "He ran when the Indians came."

"Biggest mistake he ever made."

"He said he'd been delayed at Latham's, and was just riding by."

"Except he never went at Latham's. I saw Rollie." As he spoke, a gap was filled in this violent day. He saw a thing clearly for the first time, and he guessed he understood about the cut fence around the alkali water hole. "Fallon was too busy shoving our cattle across on Apache grass. Then he rode here to make sure you'd gone."

There was, he sensed, this shadow yet between them. His fine feeling of moments ago fell away.

But a fierce knowing came into her eyes. "He knew you'd follow the stock. That's what he wanted. He thought you wouldn't come back alive."

He had no time to answer. She was against him, close and shaking. That was how he knew that no real doubts had ever existed in her mind.

Cry, Coyote!

By PHIL SQUIRES

Cry, coyote! Cry lonely at dawn,
Lament for a past unforgotten but gone;
For buffalo black on the wide grassy plains,
In a land still unfettered by civilized chains.

Cry shrill for a moonrise undimmed by the glare
Of cities and highways! Who is there to share
With a slim little wolf all the longing he wails
From moon mystic hilltops and shadowy trails?

Howl, coyote, gray ghost of the rimrock! Your cry
Stirs echoes in hearts where old memories lie.
Cry, coyote! Cry lonely at dawn
For wilderness freedom now vanished and gone.

TOM BROWNING had lost the right to live peacefully, and to fall in love, because of one man . . . his brother, the killer

TOM BROWNING stared blankly through the train window. He closed his eyes against the rolling prairie and immediately the clatter of the tracks telegraphed their rhythmic, monotonous message. St. Louis, Kansas City, Leavenworth and Joplin; Abilene, Dodge City, Wichita and Hays. His eyes snapped open. His hands clenched into tight fists.

Two years. He was sick and tired of running. If folks wouldn't let him be honest, then to hell with it. Now he'd make one last effort for respectability. If he failed. . . .

His taut body relaxed and a weary smile creased his lean, sharp features. He bent forward, opening the carpet bag at his feet. For a moment his hand rested on the gun and belt. Reassurance warned him. He nodded his head and the smile vanished.

Then, reaching past the gunbelt, he withdrew a deck of cards. He leaned back, his face poker-blank, his hands coming alive. With an air of practiced nonchalance, he shuffled the cards, riffled them, palmed aces, dealt from the bottom, the middle.

"Pawnee!" The shout echoed through the car.

Tom pocketed his cards and closed the bag. He stood, bracing against the lurching, grinding halt of the train, and from an inside coat pocket took a letter. He stared at it, then pensively tapped a corner of it against his front teeth. For an instant he considered tearing it up. But then he decided against it. This last try at honesty meant being honest with every one.

Alighting from the train, he strode directly to the depot, found a mail box, and dropped in the letter. At once he felt both noble and futile. It was across these unburned bridges that his past kept

OF DEATH

by TEDDY KELLER

catching up with him. Doubtful now, he moved outside into the slanting afternoon sun. He put down his bag and took a long look at his last chance.

From the depot, which squatted near a muddy creek, the main street ambled up to a church and a schoolhouse which faced each other near the top of a gentle rise. Between ran a double row of false-fronted buildings. Saddle horses and various rigs stood along the hitch rails.

Busy feet clumped up and down the boardwalks. Hammers rang from half-built loading pens to the east, along the tracks. And half-a-dozen covered wagons clustered to the west. It was no booming trail town, Tom guessed. But apparently prosperity had come to Pawnee.

"Figure on staying long?"

Tom glanced to his right. A tall, black-dressed young man leaned against the depot tie rail. The man drew himself up arrogantly and, with a practiced gesture, hitched back his coat to reveal a star pinned to his black vest. Tom checked the urge to tell the lawman it was none of his business. And he felt a momentary shock at learning how little this last chance meant to him.

Finally he said, "It's hard to say."

"You're no homesteader," the lawman said, moving toward Tom, the hint of a swagger in his big frame. "No cowman either." His heavy features darkened. "Pawnee doesn't cotton to tinhorns."

TOM forced a smile, and commanded his tongue to be civil. He said, "Lawyering's my trade, I thought maybe I could find a post here where I could hang up my shingle."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" The lawman strode forward, his hand extended. "I'm Jesse MacCauley, sheriff in these parts. And you're the gent that's gonna keep half the town off my neck."

"You in trouble?" Tom asked, shaking hands.

MacCauley slapped his thigh and roared with raucous laughter. "Hell, no," he boomed. "Only trouble I have is those lunk-headed homesteaders. C'mon, I'll show you where you can get yourself an office."

He wheeled, not offering to help with the luggage. Tom shrugged and picked up his carpetbag. MacCauley halted. Then turning, he shouted, "Coming?"

He waited till Tom caught up with him. Then, hunching his shoulders, he thumped up the boardwalk at a brisk pace. "I'm not going too fast, am I?" he asked.

"No," Tom murmured, lengthening his own stride. And the sheriff seemed disappointed.

"This's how things stand," MacCauley grunted. "We have homesteaders. The railroad is surveying for a new line to the northwest. Well, Pawnee's sitting smack on the edge of an old land grant—something about the Louisiana Purchase. Ten years back, the government decided this was all an Indian reservation. Then they changed their minds and moved the redskins to the Nations. There're homesteads and claims out there that go plumb back to the Fifties. There's range trouble, too."

"Sounds like a mess," Tom said.

"Scrambled like my breakfast eggs." MacCauley grinned widely at his joke. Then he halted abruptly and faced Tom. "I clean forgot to ask your name."

Tom hesitated only an instant. Then, he said, "Browning. Tom Browning."

"Howdy," MacCauley said. "Glad to . . ." He broke off, sobering. "You're no kin of . . ." Again he broke off. Derision showed in his smile as he looked Tom over. "Reckon not. Even if you are, you're not gonna be any trouble."

In two years, Tom had learned to control his anger. But even now rage almost boiled over. He turned away, body taut, jaw tightly clamped.

Slowly he took a deep breath and asked, "Where's this office?"

MacCauley stared sharply at Tom and, without looking, pointed across the street. "Over there."

Tom stepped down into the street, still taking deep breaths, letting the anger drain from him. He heard MacCauley come from behind. But he didn't hesitate or turn until he had reached the opposite boardwalk.

"Now where?" he asked.

"You're right in front of it," MacCauley said, his smile more friendly now. "Forgot

to tell you. The place's busy today. Fool women have it cluttered."

The last of Tom's anger subsided. As the blood ceased its pounding through his head, he became aware of the pleasant chatter of women's voices. He turned to look.

Sun and rain had peeled most of the paint from the building. Tom couldn't even make out the words that had been spelled above the window. But there was no mistaking the building's present use. Across the window, whitewash letters proclaimed, "BAZAAR." A hand-painted poster in a lower corner of the window, read, "First Church Must Grow With Pawnee. Do Your Part to Help."

MacCauley shifted uncomfortably. "Guess you'd rather come back tomorrow," he suggested.

"Nope," Tom said. "I can't think of a better way to get started than meeting the wives of everybody in town. Come on. Introduce me, and maybe I'll buy you an apron."

MacCauley wilted like a stiff shirt in hot water. His head drooped, he colored. He acted like a youngster sentenced to stable cleaning.

The reason for the sheriff's reluctance was soon apparent. If he commanded respect in Pawnee, it was from the men. The busy women bustled past him or elbowed him aside when he stood in the way. Their inquiring glances weren't lost on Tom, but he was more interested in the glowing crimson of MacCauley's face. Hurt anger was replacing reluctance.

"Ladies!" He roared suddenly. When the women quieted, he drew himself up and said, "I came in here to tell you some news you'll be glad to hear. I didn't figure on getting trampled on."

"Get it said," a woman snapped. "We're busy."

MacCauley's big frame trembled. His mouth worked twice before words came out. Then he grated, "This is Tom Browning. He's a lawyer."

WHATEVER else MacCauley had to say was lost in the racket as the women stampeded Tom. His hand was almost shaken loose from his arm. He smiled and nodded to all.

"I'm Abigail Withers."

"I'm Mrs. Nels Sorenson. You must meet my daughter Phoebe."

"I'm Mrs. Biggerstaff. My husband owns the general store."

"Mr. Lundquist and I will expect you for supper some day."

Mrs. So-and-So. Mrs. What's-her-name. Tom's head spun.

Then a firm, warm hand gripped his and a quiet voice said, "I'm Amy Blake."

"I'm going crazy," Tom said, grinning, "but that's one name I'll remember."

"Browning," MacCauley shouted. Hunching his shoulders, bulling his way through the women, he grumbled. "Let's go."

When he had reached them, Amy asked, "What's your hurry?" Her gaze swung back to Tom and long, brown hair brushed her shoulders. She was a small girl with neat, wide-eyed features.

"Gotta get busy," MacCauley fumbled. "I have to find him a place to live."

"That's easy," Amy said. "We'll put him in the cottage across from the parsonage."

"No," MacCauley growled. Again he fumbled and finally offered lamely, "He wouldn't like it."

"Why not?" Tom asked. He was only vaguely aware of the brewing argument, and of MacCauley's hostility. He had known many pretty girls, even a few truly beautiful ones, but he had never met a girl like Amy. Her round face only bordered on prettiness, yet her eyes held a depth that had known tragedy—and still sparkled with contagious humor. Tom guessed her at barely twenty, but already tiny laugh lines crinkled the corners of her wide mouth.

"The parson wouldn't like it," MacCauley barked. "Browning can get a room at the hotel."

"Nonsense," Amy said. "Daddy'd be glad to have Mr. Browning across the street. Besides, a man needs a home, not some bare room."

Tom had been ready to jump into the argument with both feet, taking Amy's side. Now he backed off. Much as Amy attracted him, and nice as it would be living near her, he didn't dare antagonize the law—not yet, anyhow. It would be better to give in.

But already it was too late. Amy stretched on tip-toe, peered about, and called, "Mrs. Gilchrist, come and talk to Mr. Browning about renting your cottage."

The fire in MacCauley's glance seared through Tom. It wasn't just anger this time, it was hate. The sheriff muttered to himself as he stalked out.

Mrs. Gilchrist took Tom's money, Amy gave him directions, and he found the cottage. It was a trim little place, well kept and with a newly-painted white picket fence. It was furnished with odds and ends, and had a few too many doo-dads stuck around, but it was homey. Tom stretched out on the horsehair sofa.

He had barely closed his eyes when heavy boots thumped across his porch. MacCauley's voice boomed, "Browning!"

"Come on in," Tom said, without stirring.

MacCauley stomped inside, letting the screen door bang behind him. "I want to talk to you," he announced.

"Talk's cheap," Tom said, sitting up sleepily. He had the uneasy feeling that he and MacCauley were about to lock horns. He had wanted to stay on the friendly side of the law, but if MacCauley pushed, he'd push back.

"You catch on kind of slow," MacCauley said, plopping into a chair opposite Tom. "Most coyotes who come to Pawnee get two things figured out fast. They find out I'm the law here, and they start staying away from Amy Blake."

"That sounds sensible," Tom granted, "for coyotes."

MacCauley thrust half out of his chair. "You know what I'm getting at."

"Maybe," Tom said evenly. "But you forget I'm dry behind the ears, MacCauley. I don't scare easily—like maybe some good-looking young sodbuster."

"You want to stay here?" MacCauley demanded.

"Maybe." Tom smiled wearily and with quiet emphasis said, "If I decide I like it, I'll stay."

MacCauley shot up from his chair. Rage twisted his face. "You're not staying anywhere till you answer my question."

"What question?" Tom asked, knowing what it would be. And now he was on the defensive, trying to think of a reply that wouldn't have him run out of town before sundown.

"Are you any kin . . ."

"Anybody home?" Amy asked from the door.

Tom stood, but she was already coming through the door. MacCauley wheeled to face her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Well, now, Sheriff," she said evenly, "I don't know that that's any of your business. But if you must know, I'm paying a social call on our new neighbor."

"I don't like it," MacCauley grumbled.

"Like she said," Tom repeated, "it's none of your business. And we'll excuse you any time you want to leave."

"Maybe I'm not leaving."

"Well, I am," Amy said. She faced Tom now and gave him a warm smile. "Mother is expecting you for supper. She won't take no for an answer, and we eat at six."

"I'll be there," Tom said, moving to the screen door and holding it for her. "And thanks."

She smiled again and hurried out. Tom lingered, watching her, and saw that the rest of his luggage had been brought from the depot and piled on the porch. Then he turned back into the room.

"I warned you," MacCauley grated.

Tom stretched out again on the sofa. Closing his eyes, he murmured, "Don't slam the door as you leave."

MAC CAULEY'S departure might have wrecked a less solid house. Tom smiled briefly, then frowned. He certainly had gotten off to a flying start in Pawnee. He wondered whether he should even bother unpacking. But then he remembered Amy. He felt almost sad at the way his pulse quickened when he pictured her.

He dozed fitfully. Finally he got up, unpacked, washed and changed clothes. He crossed the street, doubtful. Then, catching the scent of hot apple pie, he rapped on the door. Amy appeared immediately.

She was crisp and fresh in her gingham dress. Her neat apron gave her an appear-

ance of efficiency. The glow in her cheeks, from working in a hot kitchen, heightened the radiance of her smile as she opened the screen.

"So this is our new lawyer," Amy's father, the parson, said, coming into the hallway.

He was a smallish man with sharply handsome features beneath a receding hairline. Good humor sparked in his deep eyes, but he looked thin and overworked.

"Daddy," Amy said as he came forward with outstretched hand, "this is Tom Browning."

"Browning!"

Reverend Blake halted as though Tom had kicked him in the belly. His mouth dropped open. Then he straightened, tensing, and the proffered hand jerked back and clenched into a tight fist.

"Browning," he repeated, biting the word. "Are you any relation . . . ."

"Daddy!" Amy cried.

The parson stared, then shook himself. Grinning sheepishly, he reached for Tom's hand. "Don't mind me," he said. "I never yet met a sky pilot in this country who wasn't a little loco."

Amy touched the men's clasped hands, looked into both their eyes, then bustled off to the kitchen. Reverend Blake ushered Tom into the parlor. Tom sat stiffly, preparing to fidgit. But the parson kept conversation alive till Amy called them to the table.

Tom would have recognized Mrs. Blake anywhere. She was a graying, very slightly heavier version of Amy, with the same even-featured round face, the same dark eyes, the same neat figure.

The meal was like nothing Tom had eaten in years. Everything was hot and steaming and fragrant and tasty and tender. The family's good humor provided rich background to the meal. But Tom couldn't relax. His guard was up. The parson's reaction to his name had been too violent.

Supper over, Tom excused himself as soon as possible. Amy walked with him to her front gate. In the cool night, under a sliver of moon, her eyes reflected the twinkle of distant stars. And Tom despised the past that made him a fugitive.

"For a young man," Amy said softly, "you have an awful lot bottled up inside you."

Tom tensed involuntarily. Forcing a chuckle, he said, "Nothing of importance."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Maybe some day you'll have to know," he said. "Not now."

For a moment she seemed disappointed at being shut out. Then she smiled and said, "You'll always be welcome here. Good night."

"Thanks," Tom said. He reached for her hand, gave it a little squeeze, then hurried away.

He got ready for bed quickly, but sleep eluded him. A nagging conscience kept him tossing. He should have told Amy about himself. To delay was to make everything more difficult. If only he hadn't mailed that letter; then he might have a chance. But there were things a man had to do, regardless of consequences.

Sleep came at last, and Tom awakened in the morning full of hope. Whatever secrets his past refused to hide, if he could prove himself in Pawnee, he might—just might—be able to court Amy. It was a gamble, but it was worth every ounce of effort he could muster.

He shaved dangerously fast, dressed, and ran down to the main street. Finding a cafe, he gulped coffee and flapjacks, then raced up the street to his office. Unpacking his few law books, he found that the churchwomen had left the place spotless. Somebody had moved in a battered old desk, a table, and several chairs.

He took out his shingle then, and the iron bracket from which it would swing. "Thomas J. Browning, Attorney at Law." How many times had he hung that sign with hope? And how many times had he yanked it down with an angry mob behind him? Now he dragged a chair to the boardwalk. Climbing up, he took out hammer and nails. The lusty banging of his hammer proclaimed his challenge to the town. Tom Browning was here to stay.

Jumping down, Tom came face to face with his first client. He was a big, broad man.

"I heard about you last night," the sodbuster said. "I have a claim proved up all legal-like. Railroad says they's coming through and aren't paying me a penny, because it's Injun land."

"Come in, friend," Tom said.

Before he had finished with the farmer, a rancher and his wife came in. He had barely started with them when a group of farmers entered. After that he lost count. More and more people came, filling, crowding, jamming the small office. They pressed in on Tom until he had to apologize each time he moved an arm. But he had only smiles for them as he accepted their fees, jotted down facts, and consulted his books.

It was past noon when somebody—he never knew who—placed a cup of coffee and a plate of beef stew at his elbow. Eating as he worked, he smiled his thanks to the crowd.

The afternoon waned and still the office bulged. Physically, Tom was worn out. But with each new problem his mind became more alert. He almost felt his brain beginning to function, relishing the work thrust upon it. He was working. He was helping. For the first time in years he felt needed.

Abruptly, then, everybody was gone. Tom shoved up from his chair and began blowing out lamps. Lamps? Who had lit them? He smiled wearily and shook his head. Where had the day gone?

He dragged himself to the cafe, then home and to bed. As he surrendered to sleep, he wondered how many days like today he'd need before he could buy the kind of a house Amy would like.

Tom's second day was a repetition of the first. People swarmed to his office like flies to a church picnic. They brought simple matters and complex ones. Some problems required only his translation of legal terminology. Other cases would have to go to court. And he began to wonder where and when court would convene.

THEN, as suddenly as on the evening before, the crowd vanished. Tom slumped in his chair. Long fingers rubbed the bridge of his nose. A pleasant drowsiness crept over him. He was dozing when heard the quick click of tiny shoes on the boardwalk. He roused himself and squinted toward the door. Amy stood there, holding a covered tray.

Smiling, she said, "Some little boys never learn when to go home for supper."

"If that's food," Tom said, "you're welcome." He shoved up from his chair and bowed. "As a matter of fact, you're welcome anyway."

"Thank you." Still smiling, she crossed to the old table and put down the tray. Setting out plate, napkin, and silver, she said, "We watched for you all last evening. When you were late again tonight, Mother decided we'd better bring the mountain to Mohammed."

Tom pulled up a chair and sat. "Milk?" he asked, pointing to a glass and a small pitcher.

"I told Mother you'd rather have coffee," Amy said, "but she said milk's good for you and you'll sleep better after it. She knows."

"I'm too hungry to argue," he said, picking up knife and fork.

It was a simple meal, but excellently prepared. While he ate, Amy busied herself serving him and telling him how well folks in Pawnee liked him.

He had just finished a slab of pie, and Amy was gathering up dishes, when MacCauley stalked in.

"Amy, you shouldn't be here," he snapped, halting just inside the door.

"Well," Amy said with annoyance, "I certainly don't know why."

"You have no business mixing with the likes of Browning."

"Now hold on," Tom said, getting to his feet.

"You hold on," MacCauley flared back.

"Both of you be quiet," Amy said. She stacked dishes on the tray and spoke up. "Tom Browning, quit sassing the law. Jesse MacCauley, stop poking your nose in my affairs."

"If you keep company with Browning, it's my business," MacCauley stated. He gave Tom a self-satisfied smirk and added, "I know who he is. I've been sending some telegrams."

"You're a sneaking, dirty skunk," Tom grated.

MacCauley advanced a step. "And you're a . . ."

"Tom," Amy said fearfully, "what does he mean?"

Tom's lean frame went rigid as he fought the rage that swept him. Sure he could jump MacCauley, but maybe that was what the

sheriff wanted. Abruptly, it hit Tom. His last chance had failed. The fight drained out of him. Slowly he shook his head and turned away.

"Jesse," Amy said, "what is all this? Tell me?"

MacCauley's voice almost rang with triumph. "I found out that our honest, respectable lawyer is the brother of Black Jack Browning."

Amy sucked in her breath. Her tone pinched

MacCauley fell again, pitching headlong into the dusty street

by horror, she murmured, "Oh, no." Then, "Tom?"

"It's true," he said, dragging himself around to face her.

Her gaze faltered, fell and life seeped from her face. Then she seized the tray and hurried out.

MacCauley was chuckling. "That'll teach you better'n to try to put one over on me."

"Sheriff," Tom said softly, straightening, "have you lodged any official charges against me?"

"Of course not," MacCauley said.

"Then get the hell out." Tom hunched forward, menacing, and a knife edge slashed through his voice. "Set foot in here once more without a warrant for my arrest, and I'll break your neck."

"Now wait a minute," MacCauley protested, backing.

"Get out!" Tom roared.

MacCauley backed through the door.

TOM lurched against the desk, seething with fury. It hadn't taken long, the collapse of this last chance. By tomorrow his law business would be cut in half. In two days he'd be idle and there'd be dark, hostile stares meeting him on the street. Within a week everybody in town would have frozen him out, or they'd be after his scalp. It was an old and familiar pattern.

Pulse slowing, he took a deep breath and moved around the office blowing out lamps. The anger gone now, he felt utterly washed out. Sure, he'd been whipped before. But never had his brother been used to drive a wedge between Tom and a girl. This time the knife had been sent deep—and then twisted.

At least, he consoled himself, he'd been square with Black Jack. He'd written of his new location. And the letter hadn't hurt a bit. It was MacCauley's damn suspicions.

Tom cast one wistful glance around the office. Then, shrugging, he hauled a box from under the desk and began packing books. He couldn't blame Jack. A kid born full of fire, at ten he had lost both parents to the Quantrill savages and had used a Sharps .50 to knock three of those raiders from their saddles.

Sorrow and shock built a shell around the boy. When relatives separated the brothers, none had been able to pierce through to warm the heart of Jack. Now, in his middle twenties, he was called the slickest gambler between St. Louis and Denver.

Legend credited him with more. It was known that nine men had questioned his deal

had reached for guns and had died. Three others had objected to his attentions to particular girls, and had gone down in street fights.

Tom blamed circumstances, not Jack. Tom's profession called him to the more settled towns, but civilization would have nothing to do with the brother of a killer. And neither would a fine girl like Amy.

Amy. Tom paused in his packing. No, there was no doubting her reaction. Still, he hesitated to bolt Pawnee without a definite word from her. The town was thriving, after all. This was as good a place as any to begin his career as a gambler, if he were driven to that. And there were deals on the fire he should straighten out, if the folks still wanted him to handle them.

Shoving the box under the desk, Tom left the office. At the lower end of the main street, two saloons belched forth the racket of desperate merriment. The hunt of boom town was strong in Pawnee. It'd do for a start for him, Tom thought.

Tom didn't hurry next morning. He loafed at shaving, and loitered over his breakfast. When he saw the crowd in front of his office, he almost turned back for his guns. Then he recognized his clients.

If this day were any different from the first two, it was busier. And similar days followed. Occasionally, Tom caught glimpses of MacCauley passing by, checking, but he was too busy to worry. At night sleep came before he could turn many thoughts to Amy. Lost in work, he almost forgot his troubles.

Then, one evening, the crowd in his office dispersed earlier than usual. For awhile he slumped in his chair, his brain whirling dizzily. Little things began drifting back to him—voices out of the crowd, some approving him, some applauding him, even a suggestion that he'd make a good mayor.

He hadn't had time to think about it before. Now he knew. MacCauley had sense enough to realize Tom's value to a smoothly-running Pawnee, a condition which helped secure the sheriff's position. MacCauley used Black Jack only to frighten Amy away. Nobody else knew, not yet. MacCauley wouldn't like this mayor talk, though. He was big man. A mayor might be bigger.

Leaving his office, Tom became aware of new night sounds. The metallic clatter of dancehall pianos and the shrill laugh of gaudy girls still spewed from the lower end of the street. Other merriment, less forced, sounded from the upper end. There was a fiddle—no, two fiddles—and a guitar, happy voices, stomping boots.

Tom remembered other bits of conversation then. He had even been invited to the square dance at the schoolhouse, but by a woman with a gangly young daughter. He wondered whether Amy was at the dance, and suddenly he felt lonely.

It struck him as ironic, so nearly was it like his every relation to the town. Below him punchers and a few wild homesteaders, and girls and gamblers, hooted it up in trail-town style. On the hill gathered the solid citizens, for their more innocent fun. In the middle stood Tom, alone. Before long he'd join one group or the other. But which?

Right now he was a businessman. Lighting a cheroot, he strolled up the hill. Half a dozen squares of dancers promenaded around the school yard. On the gaily-lighted front steps the musicians sawed and plunked their rhythms. Older folks clustered near a cider barrel at the rear.

A dance was breaking up and folks, spotting Tom, shouted neighborly greetings. He saw Amy immediately. She gave him a guarded smile. MacCauley hovered possessively over her, and he seemed not in the slightest disturbed by Tom's presence. His smile was one of smug confidence.

SIPPING cider, Tom complained of weariness and departed at once. He couldn't bear to watch Amy with MacCauley. And the sheriff was too sure of himself. He looked like a man with three aces in his hand and another up his sleeve.

Amy troubled him. MacCauley troubled him. Tom spent a restless night, tossing fitfully. By morning he had worried himself into a stew about the ace up MacCauley's sleeve.

Dressing in his best always tended to revive Tom. He went to breakfast, then climbed the hill to the church. Again he saw Amy with MacCauley. He hardly noticed the

friendly nods and smiles as he found a pew. Was it his imagination that the Reverend Blake avoided his glance?

When Tom could pull his thoughts away from Amy, he recognized a good sermon. A word from the pulpit snapped him alert. Reverend Blake spoke about Cain and Abel and used again and again the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Now the parson's attention riveted on Tom. The sky pilot wasn't exhorting his congregation, he was preaching directly to Tom.

So now others knew about Black Jack. Who? Perhaps only the Blakes. MacCauley, playing it smart, might have driven the wedge between Tom and the Blakes. That would make certain of Amy.

The service ended with an announcement of a picnic lunch in the churchyard. Despite his troubles, Tom could hardly suppress a grin. The last Amen still hung in the air when aggressive mothers began towing blushing daughters in Tom's direction. Pleading work at the office, he retreated. If all those invitations could be tacked end to end, he thought ruefully, he could eat well for a month.

An uninspired restaurant meal made Tom's loneliness return. A train hooted in the distance. He shoved up from his chair and went out. In the warm sun and gentle breeze he only felt more alone. It was the season for buggy rides with pretty girls, and rabbit hunting with friends, and picnics like the one at the church. He even envied the train that came puffing and clanking into town. The train, at least, had a purpose and a destination.

Tom shook himself. There might be mail on that train. He moved down the boardwalk to the depot and lounged, chewing a cehrot, near the postal window. He heard boots crunch across the gravel outside, but didn't look up.

"No brass band?" a laughing voice inquired. "No lynch mob?"

Tom wheeled. Black Jack Browning stood grinning in the depot door. From his twenty-dollar boots to his rakishly cocked hat, he glistened in blacks and whites. He leaned against the door jamb, not unaware of the picture he made.

Wide-shouldered, snake-hipped, he might have been a darkly-handsome cowpoke duded up for Sunday courting. The gun made the difference. The way it hung, the elegantly tooled belt and holster, the right hand never straying far, all marked Jack as a gunfighter. Behind him, the engine snorted and the train began to move.

"Jack!" Tom gasped. "What the hell?" He checked the impulse to run to his brother.

"I left the hottest faro bank you ever saw," Jack said, "and rode that iron horse three hundred miles. Now all you want to know is what the hell. You might at least act glad to see me."

"Sure I'm glad to see you," Tom said. He moved now, grasped Jack's hand and pumped it. "But what're you doing here?"

Jack's grin vanished like an echo. "Damn," he muttered thoughtfully. A half smile returned to his lips, but fire sparked deep in his dark eyes. "Damn. I should have had better sense than to fall for that telegram."

"Telegram?" Tom breathed.

Jack stared absently into space and quoted, "Trouble here. Come at once. Tom." He shook his head. "I should've known better."

"MacCauley," Tom muttered. He whipped around and faced up the street. "The local sheriff."

"What's his game?"

"I figured it was just a girl at first," Tom said. He turned back. "Anybody offering a reward for your hide?"

Jack grinned, the moment of tension past. "Reckon I might be worth something in St. Louis." He took out makings. "There was a Texan I took for twenty-five hundred in Tascosa. I heard he put a thousand on my scalp. No takers, though. Probably he's eaten up six other tinhorns since then."

"Then it must be Amy," Tom murmured thoughtfully.

"Hey," Jack asked, "you finally got yourself a girl?"

Tom explained briefly. Then, "The mayor talk must've gotten to MacCauley. He means to wreck my romance, and my business and political chances all at the same time."

"Guess it's not much fun," Jack said, his grin fading, "being my brother."

"To hell with 'em," Tom snapped. "There're

other towns. And I'm pretty good with a deck."

Jack regarded his brother solemnly. "It's no life for you."

"That's my decision." Tom turned to the door. "Let's go pack my stuff."

"Wait." Jack sprang after Tom and grabbed his shoulder. "Hold on. If this MacCauley wants to discredit you, it'll take the wind out of his sails if I'm not around. I'll jump back on that train right now."

HE BROKE off and both whirled to the tracks. The train was gone. Tom shrugged. "Next one through is in the morning."

"Tomorrow, then," Jack said. He slid his Colt up and down in its holster. "If MacCauley wants trouble before then, he'll get it. And I'm hungry."

"The hotel spreads a good feed," Tom said. Then he was grinning and thumping his brother's back. "By golly, I haven't seen you in three years. We have a lot to catch up on."

Tom felt a peculiar sense of pride while striding up the boardwalk beside his handsome, notorious brother. He had paid enough for that notoriety, he figured; it was high time he was enjoying it. Confidence flooded him. He noticed Jack's alert, ever-roving glance, and felt safe. Who was MacCauley? Tom and Black Jack Browning could handle an army.

While Jack was eating, they swapped three years' collection of adventures. Tom read the delight in Jack's eyes when he related his gambling victories. But misery clouded the eyes when it was a story of a gun fight. Tom felt relief. Despite the record, Jack was no professional killer.

Dinner done, Tom led the way out onto the boardwalk. Jack joined him, and they strolled down the boardwalk. Suddenly a .45's roar crashed through the Sabbath afetrnoon. Jack groaned and pitched face forward onto the boards. Tom wheeled, reaching for his gun, then realized that it was hanging from a peg at home. MacCauley and two men stepped from the doorway of the mercantile next to the hotel.

For an instant Tom froze in his crouch, paralyzed by the cold-blooded shooting. Up in the church yard, somebody shouted. MacCauley and his men, sardonically holstering their guns, moved closer. Behind him, Tom heard the stampede that burst from the saloons.

Jack groaned, swore and rolled over. MacCauley's confident step broke. Tom sprang aside, bent, and came up with Jack's gun. He ignored Jack's gasped, "Don't do it. Things are bad enough now."

Thumbing the hammer of the gun, Tom raged, "Stop right there, you yellow-bellied, sneaking cowards."

The lawmen lurched to a halt. The deputies muttered something, and confusion swept MacCauley's face. For a moment he appeared ready to back down. Then came the sounds of people swarming down from the church, and up from the saloons. The sheriff's jaw set determinedly.

"There are three of us," he said, taking a step forward.

Tom triggered a slug into the boards between MacCauley's boots. "But there's only one stinking MacCauley," he grated. "Make one more move and you'll die."

MacCauley faltered back. "That isn't going to go easy for you!"

"Shut up!" Tom roared, advancing a step. Dimly, through the heat of his rage, he was aware of the crowd, swirling, settling in the street. "I don't know why I'm talking," he groaned through clenched teeth. "I ought to gun you like you did Jack."

"Tom," Jack called, "get me to your place. That sidewinder lost his stinger."

Abruptly, the blind rage drained out of Tom. He saw the whipped-dog sheriff, and the clustered people who must have been close to guessing the truth. He shoved the gun into his belt.

Jack heaved himself to his knees. Tom ducked under Jack's right arm and brought him to his feet. Perspiration popped out on Jack's ashen face, but he set his jaw and managed a weak grin.

As they hobbled down the boardwalk, Tom heard a voice from the crowd say, "I saw the whole thing. He was shot in the back."

The young doctor arrived while Tom was getting Jack stretched out on the horsehair

sofa. The sawbones went about his business methodically. In a short time Jack's left shoulder was swathed in bandages.

"Lucky," the doctor said, stowing instruments into his bag. He stood and moved to the door. "The bullet went through and made a clean wound. In a couple of weeks there'll only be a sore spot and a scar. Mighty lucky." He stepped through the screen door. "I'll be back tomorrow."

When the doctor was gone, Jack raised his head. "This sure is a dandy mess I got you into."

"Forget it," Tom said. "It would've come anyway. I'm sorry you had to get hurt."

Jack waved the matter aside, then asked, "What do you figure will happen now?"

"MacCauley won't stop at anything." Tom wheeled to the bedroom and returned with a long suitcase. "It's only a matter of time till he gets the town on the warpath."

JACK twisted around to watch Tom put down the suitcase and open it. Tom took out two Winchesters and a shotgun, then boxes of ammunition. He made another trip to the bedroom and came back strapping on his gun belt.

"Always figured this artillery'd come in handy," he said, grinning.

"You?" Jacked asked. "The peace lover?"

"I'll handle my share."

Jack smiled and shook his head. "Maybe so, but we can't cut down the whole town. We can't even cover this house."

"The back of the house," Tom said, settling into a chair, "is fitted up with heavy shutters that fasten from the inside. I'm guessing we can hold the fort till dark. After that it's not far to some fast horses."

"Strikes me as kind of desperate," Jack observed, relaxing into the sofa, "but I have no better suggestions. Just don't forget to close those shutters."

Tom spun the cylinder of his .45 and shoved up from his chair. He moved quickly through the house, closing and locking the shutters. When he returned to the parlor, Jack was dozing.

Slumping into the chair again, he busied himself checking the small arsenal. But, try as he might to avoid it, the thoughts came crowding in. He wondered about Amy and the life they might have shared. He wondered about MacCauley, and the deputies, and the townspeople. It shocked him to discover that he was scared. He glanced out the window, gauging the hour by the shadow of the big cottonwood down the street. It was a long time till sundown.

His gaze wandered to Jack, and a surge of anger stiffened him. There lay the cause of his trouble. Their trails hadn't crossed in three years, yet Black Jack Browning had run Tom out of towns from the Mississippi to the Medicine. How many fresh starts had Tom made? How many times had his law business flourished and then died? Only one romance was involved, but that was one too many.

Tom lurched upright in his chair, his six-gun in his hands. It would be so simple—let MacCauley take Jack. Then, if the hangman didn't get Jack permanently, a prison would hold him for many years.

The sound of voices drifted from the street. Tom dived from his chair and knelt by the window. Peering out cautiously, he saw MacCauley, the deputies, and a dozen stragglers trailing down the street.

Turning, Tom gazed a long moment at his sleeping brother. At last he shrugged, grinned, and shook his head. Many times the Brownings had battled separately. This time they'd fight side by side.

"Hey, Browning," MacCauley shouted, "show yourself! I want to make peace talk."

Tom stood and glanced to the sofa. Jack winked at him. Tom moved to the door and onto the porch, his gun holstered. MacCauley and his deputies stood just beyond the middle of the street. The stragglers bunched off to one side, well out of range.

"This's your party," Tom said. "Start talking."

"I came to give a last chance to surrender," MacCauley answered. He glanced to the curious onlookers and made a show of moving closer. But he took only one step. "We already have plenty of charges against you—aiding and abetting a fugitive, resisting arrest, throwing down on the law—"

"Also," Tom shouted, for the benefit of the bystanders, "I made you jook like the jack-

ass you are. What's the penalty for that?"

"Don't get smart," MacCauley snapped. "I'm trying to help you."

Tom chuckled. "Then stop wagging your jaw, and say something."

"I'm telling you," MacCauley fumed, "you're in plenty of trouble right now. You'd better give up or it'll go mighty hard for you. I aim to lock you up right along with your murdering brother."

"Clear out," Tom shouted. "MacCauley, if you're in the way when we make our move, you'll go down and you won't come back up. Now vamoose. Only, when you go—" he put an edge in his voice—"don't turn your back. I can't stand yellow."

MacCauley swore, and reached for his gun. Expecting the play, Tom didn't move. The gun came up, flashed, and roared. The bullet ripped through one of the shingles of the cottage.

Tom yawned, then shouted, "Better stick to shooting backs, MacCauley. Your aim is rotten." He pivoted and entered the house.

Inside, Jack had moved to the chair, and now held a rifle across his lap. He smiled and winked, but held his gaze on the front window. "Reckon the fat's in the fire," he remarked.

"Looks that way."

"You're plumb loco," Jack said. "Why didn't you break and run? You could've cleared town easy."

Tom picked up a rifle, levered a cartridge into the chamber, and propped it against the door jamb. "Thought you might want me to hold your hand," he said.

"When was it you went out of your head?" Jack asked. "You used to be a sensible guy."

"Somebody dropped a deck of cards on my skull."

Jack laughed, then he said, "Maybe we ought to bust through now."

"I can't figure the temper of the town," Tom said. "If it were just MacCauley and his frazzle-tail deputies, I'd say yes. But you can't travel fast enough to lose a posse. Night's the time to make the break, the way I see it."

"Maybe so," Jack agreed. "But this waiting sure spooks a man."

THE afternoon dragged with agonizing slowness. Jack sat immobile, his gaze fixed on the front window. Tom paced from room to room, checking weapons, checking shutters, searching the kitchen for the food he hadn't stocked.

"MacCauley must have guessed our game," Jack said at last. "I'd swear he's roped the sun. It hasn't moved." He paused, then added, "Well, anyhow, here they come."

Tom stepped near the door. A crowd had gathered in the street. MacCauley was not in sight, but the voice of the mob had risen above the casual level. Then Tom recognized Reverend Blake. His back to the cottage, the parson was speaking earnestly to the crowd.

"Who's the little guy?" Jack asked.

"Blake," Tom said, "the sky pilot. I guess we have somebody on our side."

But even as Tom spoke, Reverend Blake snatched a .45 from a man and whirled to face the house.

"Come out of there, Black Jack Browning," he thundered. "Acknowledge your sins, son of Satan. Come out like a man, or I'll come after you."

"What the hell?" Jack muttered.

A roar went up from the crowd, and the parson strode toward the house. Waving a pistol, he kicked through the gate. He snapped a wild shot and then came on resolutely.

"I can drop him," Jack muttered.

"Don't shoot," Tom commanded.

He flattened himself against the wall beside the door. The parson's voice boomed closer and closer. Then his brogans thumped onto the porch. Tom brought his gun up, and motioned Jack down.

Reverend Blake was shooting as he kicked open the door. Spraying lead, he shattered a vase and knocked out the kitchen window. Then Tom's gun slashed down. The barrel caught the parson's wrist, and the shooting was over. Jabbing his gun into Reverend Blake's ribs, Tom motioned to the sofa.

The parson's head snapped toward Tom. Abruptly, then, his eyes glazed over and he stared blankly from Tom to Jack. Nodding, he stumbled to the sofa. Again his vacant stare roamed from Tom to Jack and back again. He trembled. Then he bent, buried

his face in his hands, and began sobbing softly.

Puzzled Jack glanced to the parson, to Tom, then pulled his gaze back to the window. Tom paced, not certain whether he should be angry or embarrassed.

The parson sat up suddenly. His red-eyed gaze fixing on the opposite wall, he began to speak. "It was in St. Louis, two years ago last month. We had held a successful ministry at a large church there. But our son, Amy's brother, fell in with a high-living crowd. He took to drink and to gambling, and became indebted to desperate men. He had to clear himself. One night he staked everything. There was an argument over the cards, then a fight, then . . . then a dead son. The only name I ever learned was—Black Jack Browning."

"Well, I'll be—" Jack muttered. "He was a game kid."

"Black Jack Browning," the parson went on, "was the name of a vicious animal. It never occurred to me that he might be human and have parents and a brother like Tom, that there might have been his side to the fight. But for two years now my soul has been black with the hate and revenge I've harbored there."

"If it'll make you feel better," Jack said, extending his gun toward the parson, "take a shot at me."

"No!" Reverend Blake shook his head. "I want only your forgiveness, Mr. Browning. Can you grant me that?"

Jack stared in awe at the parson. Finally, helplessly, he glanced to Tom. Tom nodded firmly.

"Certainly, sir," Jack said, coloring. "But I should ask *your* forgiveness."

"You have that," Reverend Blake said, standing. "But now won't you men give yourselves up before there's more bloodshed?"

"To MacCauley?" Tom asked.

"No," the parson said, pondering, "I guess not. Neither of you would be safe in his custody." He turned to the door. "Let me talk to the crowd."

Tom watched the parson cross the porch and said, "He can talk to the crowd and they'll listen. But nobody'll change MacCauley's mind."

When Jack didn't reply, Tom turned to him. Jack still sat in the chair, gaze fixed on the window. But his eyes saw nothing of the crowd outside. Distance showed in those eyes—and memory, and pain. At last the head pivoted and the stare focused slowly on Tom.

"As the parson would put it," Jack said, "I've cast my bread upon the waters."

Tom chuckled. "Don't tell me our fighting man is a philosopher too."

"Just never stopped to think about it before," Jack said. "You go through life packing a gun, bending over poker tables, taking money from the shadows that sit around the table. One day a shadow calls you a cheat. You put a hole through him. For a long time you worry about that shadow bleeding and dying. It bothers your sleep. Then another day you find out that the shadow was a man who breathed like you did—and you sent his soul straight to hell. And there are people that hate your guts for it. The shadow of the man is the shadow of death."

"Cut it out," Tom snapped. "Stop torturing yourself."

Jack shook his head, his gaze riveted hypnotically on Tom. "Like I tortured the Blakes and a dozen families? Like I tortured my own brother? I'm a killer, Tom."

Tom took a stride toward his brother. The sound of running steps on the porch halted him, whipped him around. He had his gun poised when Amy came in. She darted straight into Tom's arms and clung there, trembling.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I'm sorry for the things I've said and done."

"Forget it," Jack blurted, bitterness edging his tone.

AMY pulled back from Tom and glanced to Jack. When she faced Tom again, he saw the pure misery that clouded her eyes and pinched up her face.

"Can you run away?" she pleaded. "Is there anybody else you can surrender to? Daddy has the people quieted down. But that Jesse MacCauley just keeps yelling that Black Jack Browning is worth two thousand dollars in Kansas City. He's offering fifty dollars to any man who'll help him."

"Any takers?" Tom asked.

"Just the deputies." Her eyes misted then and she threw herself into Tom's arms, crying, "Isn't there some way out? Oh, Tom, I don't want you hurt."

"Afraid not." He forced a chuckle for her benefit and said, "But three-to-two odds aren't bad."

"Three-to-one's better," Jack said, shoving up from his chair.

Before Tom could break away to stop him, Jack had crossed, wobbling a little, to the door. He twisted with pain and clutched at his left shoulder. Then he pushed the screen door open.

"MacCauley!" he shouted, stepping onto the porch.

Tom saw Jack's rifle on the floor. Panic swept him. He swung around Amy and dashed for the door. He had his hand on the screen when he felt a tug at his coat tail, and heard Amy tumble. She still held on as he turned. He steadied.

"It's his fight," she said, scrambling to her feet. "As Jack would say, he made the deal, let him play his cards."

"Stay in there," Jack called over his shoulder. "It's my picnic. I've owed you this for three years."

They were both right, Tom knew. He sagged helplessly against the door jamb, watching.

"You want me, MacCauley?" Jack shouted, stepping off the porch. "Come and get me. Earn that money."

The crowd melted away like a snowball on a hot stove. Then MacCauley and his deputies stood clustered off to one side. The sheriff was partially hidden by his men. He hesitated. For an instant Tom thought he would bolt. Then MacCauley's shoulders hunched, and he swung a shotgun to his hip. Twin barrels exploded fire and death.

Jack's gun never cleared leather. In the silence he took one more step, then faltered. He fought for balance, for strength, for life, but his knees buckled and he crumpled onto the blood-soaked grass.

Momentary shock gripped Tom. Then he erupted like a rumpslapped bronc. He shouldered through the screen door, ripping it from its hinges. He saw the deputies scatter. Then he was across the porch and passing Jack's body. MacCauley pinched out a little cry of fright.. He flung the shotgun toward Tom, then turned and ran.

He tripped, got up, and ran wildly. Tom held himself to a slow trot. MacCauley reached the main street. Turning, he slipped again and sprawled full length on the boardwalk. Terror blanched his face as he struggled to his feet.

In agonized indecision, he peered wildly up and down the street. Finally he ran up the hill. But fear sapped his strength, and Tom steadily closed the gap between them. MacCauley fell again when he reached the end of the boardwalk, pitching headlong into the dusty street. He lurched up, his heavy breathing racking his body. He turned to run again, but his legs folded under him. Crying out, he pulled himself up. He jerked out his gun. Stumbling backward, he threw a wild shot.

Tom slowed to a walk. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he sensed shock at the deliberation with which he stalked MacCauley. But he kept seeing Jack cut down by that shotgun. Relentlessly, he moved closer and closer.

MacCauley's second shot spurted dust at Tom's boots. The third sang near Tom's ear. Then Tom halted and pulled his .45. MacCauley's fourth shot tugged at the skirt of Tom's coat. Then Tom brought his gun up, cocking it, and it bucked and roared in his hand.

The first shot slammed into MacCauley's stomach. Staggering back, screaming, he folded into the deadly path of the next bullet. It took him in the chest, straightening him. His mouth dropped open. Blindly, Tom fanned his gun empty. MacCauley's hugh body shuddered like a great tree with an axe at its feet. And he fell like a tree, crashing full length, stirring the dust—dead.

Tom turned slowly. His gun hung at the end of a limp arm as he shuffled down the street. He was only vaguely aware of the people pouring into the street, the morbidly curious ones rushing past him.

He wondered dazedly just what had happened, and what lay ahead. Then he saw Amy running to him, and Reverend Blake followed behind her. Somehow, that was all that mattered.

Tom soaked a long time before the soreness started to go

The Fighting Farmer

By Cy Kees

THE GIRL came around the corner of the depot, and the sweet sight of her in the glowing sunset made him forget everything else. Tom Masters stumbled over the last two platform steps and felt a quick, steadying hand behind him. By then the girl had already disappeared, leaving an exciting memory of thick tawny hair and a slender figure that was light and graceful. Coloring, Tom glanced back.

It was the bald-headed little stranger with the black cigar, who had been studying Tom ever since boarding the train, two hundred miles back on the line. Tom forced a sheepish grin.

"Thanks. Reckon I'd better watch where I'm going."

The black cigar bobbed. "Boy, never lose your head or your footing over a female. It doesn't pay." The man's little black eyes

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TOM MASTERS COULD save himself by running away, but after meeting Peggy, he would rather get beaten up than leave her. . . .

peered at Tom; then, abruptly, he put out his right hand. "My name's Lagger Lane."

Faintly uneasy, Tom shook, then gave his own name. From the feel of Lagger Lane's soft hand, it had never been close to any hard work. "I've been watching you, boy, and I think I have a good proposition for you," Lagger said. "Do you have work lined up here?"

"Not yet," Tom said, his interest struggling with an instinctive distrust of the man.

It seemed odd to have the man calling him "boy." Tom was almost thirty, even if his corn-colored hair and light gray eyes did make him look younger. He felt awkward and overgrown, standing beside the little man in the rumpled black suit.

"You c'mon with me," Lagger said, picking up his valise. "This'll be the easiest money you ever made."

Tom hesitated. There was no reason why he shouldn't listen to what the small stranger had to say, and he did need the money. He had come West to the Colorado mining town of Johnstown on a wild impulse and, now that he was here, the future looked bleak and uncertain. He had to work fast, or he'd be flat broke in a strange and wild land.

Lagger's black cigar jutted at him. "Don't stand there gasping, boy. C'mon. I'm tired."

He left no room for argument. Tom hefted the two bags which held all his possessions and followed. When they turned in at Johnstown's false-fronted hotel, he caught a glimpse of tawny hair and a slender, jeans-clad figure, disappearing into the general store across the dusty street. Tom stopped, wanting a closer look.

"C'mon, c'mon," Lagger Lane snapped. "If she hasn't spoiled so far, she'll keep a couple of days longer. Never let a female interfere with business. It doesn't pay." He pushed on into the lobby and sized it up as if he intended to buy the hotel.

Growing more uneasy by the minute, Tom waited while the man registered for a double room. When the mild-looking clerk asked if he wished to pay in advance, Lagger gave him such an indignant stare the clerk retreated a step and groped for the keys.

"Here's my deal," Lagger said, when they were settled in the room. He pulled off his tight patent-leather shoes with two glant sighs of relief, and lit a fresh black cigar. "I'm a man who believes in straight talk and laying all the cards on the table. You probably wonder what I am. You've heard of prize fighting, I suppose?"

Tom nodded, although the only interest he felt was a quick urge to keep long miles away from it.

"I'm a fight manager and a promoter of fights," Lagger stated, blowing a big cloud of smoke. "I figure I can put on a good show in Johnstown and make a little money besides. But the truth is, Tom, right now I'm in a jam."

Having already suspected this, Tom said nothing and waited for him to go on. Lagger took a long slow drag on the black cigar. "Fact is, right now I'm short an available fighter."

Tom stood up, hitched his pants, and prepared to leave. Lagger glared. "Sit down there, boy, and don't get jumpy. I'm not asking you to fight. My fighter, Slugger Dalvis, won't get here for two days, but he'll do all the fighting. Trouble is, I won't be able to work up any interest without having a fighter to show. It's the same as trying to sell whisky without a sample jug."

"Thanks anyhow, but I'll see what else I can scare up," Tom said, starting for the door.

Lagger shrugged, eyes half closed. "Suit yourself. I figured it'd be worth fifty dollars to you just to stand in till Slugger gets here."

Tom blinked. "Fifty dollars just to stand around pretending I'm your fighter for two days?"

"Yup. That and making sure you keep your mouth shut to everyone about it till Slugger *does* get here."

Tom had a hunch he should get out while he could, but he stood still, tempted. Lagger breathed a long sigh, as if he were about out of patience. "Damn, boy, there's no way I can actually make you fight, is there?"

"When will I get paid?"

Lagger flipped a thick packet of cardboard slips out of his coat pocket. "See these? They're numbered. Numbers one to fifty I sell for five dollars apiece, because the buyers get ringside positions. Numbers up to one hundred cost three and a half, and all over

that cost two dollars. I'll pay you twenty-five by noon tomorrow, and the balance as soon as Slugger shows up." He held out two tickets. "Here's a couple of complimentaries. Give them to your friends, if you can find any in Johnstown."

RELUCTANTLY, Tom took the tickets. Lagger waved at the second bed. "Be better if you live here with me till Slugger comes. I'll give you your part of the room gratis."

Tom mumbled thanks, and caught Lagger peering at him through half-closed eyes. "Which reminds me," Lagger said, chewing on the cigar, "I got caught a little short with all the heavy expenses. You happen to have a couple of extra dollars for eating money? I'll pay it back tomorrow when I give you the twenty-five."

Tom burrowed into his meager reserve and passed over a dollar. Lagger dropped it into his coat pocket as if it were less than he'd hoped for, and went out to eat. Tired from the trip, Tom crawled into bed and was soon dreaming of trim jeans and a head of thick, tawny hair.

A few sly questions at the nearest saloon in the morning got him more information than he'd dared hope for. The girl's name was Peggy Halliday, and so far she had outrun every eligible male in Johnstown. Her father, Moss Halliday, owned the general store, and right now he was looking for a man to take over the heavy work. Hearing this, Tom left his beer untouched on the bar and headed at a fast trot for the store.

Peggy Halliday was alone behind the counter, and she gave Tom a friendly smile. Tom sighed, knowing now how futile his thoughts about her had been. She was too beautiful for him even to dream of having. Her soft blue eyes warmed while she watched him.

"Can I help you with something?"

"I . . . came about the job."

He shifted uneasily under the friendliness of her gaze. Her face was so sweet and tender. It was a wonder it stayed that way while she looked at him, he thought, considering how homely he was.

"I might as well warn you right away, it's awfully hard work. You'll have to do all the heavy lifting."

"I don't mind," Tom said quickly. "I got plenty used to that on my farm before I quit." Her soft eyes lighted, encouraging him to go on. "All I raised was a good crop of rocks," he said, grinning. "That's where all the lifting came in."

Peggy Halliday laughed, and it was the sweetest music he'd ever heard. "Just tell Dad that when he comes in, and he'll give you the job for certain. He's an old busted farmer himself."

An hour later Tom was at work in the back, under the direction of Moss Halliday, a spindly, blue-eyed oldster with a mellow chuckle.

"Needn't kill yourself," Moss said finally, near noon, while Tom was wrestling flour barrels. "We'll get along."

Tom could have told him that this was a lot easier than what he'd been doing for months, fighting for existence on a half section of ground which yielded little more than wagonload after wagonload of heavy rocks. And it rested him just to glance at the tawny-haired girl behind the counter. But right then heavy footsteps sounded in the front of the store, and a loud, arrogant voice broke into his thoughts.

"Sounds like Buck Bailey is on the prod," Moss muttered, and went out front.

"Those fighting fellers will find out who's the slugger," the voice was booming. "Turn me loose in the ring, and some Fancy Dan boxer will get his head knocked off. This Slugger Masters better be loaded for bear, that's all."

"Did you say Masters?" came Peggy's startled voice.

"That's the name that smart-mouthed promoter has on his notice. As soon as I told the boys I aimed to fight that slugger of his, they commenced to buy tickets. He must have sold fifty right there." Bailey chuckled hoarsely. "They're all ready to make their bets, as soon as they get a gander at the fighter."

Wishing he'd never heard of Lagger Lane, Tom peered past a pile of sacked meal into the front of the store. With a black hat cocked far back on his shaggy head, Bailey hunched on the counter.

"As soon as I smell out the best odds, I'm putting my whole roll on myself," Bailey said. "That'll be the easiest money I ever made. I've never lost a fight yet, honey, and sometimes they jumped me two or three at a crack. There's no fighter made who can last three rounds in the same ring with me."

Eyeing Bailey, Tom tried to spot some sign of weakness in the man, but there were none. He was glad that he didn't actually have to fight Bailey, but he dreaded the thought of meeting Bailey before Slugger Dalvis showed up and this thing was straightened out. He hoped Dalvis was big as a house, and fighter enough to shut Bailey's loud mouth.

Bailey leaned further over the counter. "You don't sound very excited, honey," he said, groping for Peggy's hand. She stepped back, evading his long reach. Bailey stiffened. "You know what I have in mind for you after I double up my money, don't you?"

Tom tensed, waiting for her answer. "I have lots of work to do, Buck," she said quietly.

When Bailey stomped out, Tom heard her light footsteps coming toward the back. He tried to concentrate on his work, but soon found himself gazing into her soft blue eyes. They looked wide and worried.

"Tom, it's you he was talking about, isn't it?"

Tom glanced away. He hated to lie to her, but he couldn't forget his promise to Lagger not to say anything until the fighter showed up. "Yes, it's me." To cover his embarrassment, he brought out the two complimentary tickets Lagger had given him. "Here are free tickets for you and Moss."

Peggy tucked the tickets away without seeming to notice them. Her blue eyes strayed up and down his lean hard frame. "Buck is terribly strong, Tom. Have you fought much?"

"Some." Tom muttered. Although he loved her interest and concern, he wished she would wait with her questions until he was free to explain. "Reckon I'll stop work and have a bite to eat," he said finally, desperately. "And maybe have a talk with . . . my manager."

A big crowd was milling around a huge, red-lettered sign tacked high on the front of a saloon. Tom read it from the middle of the street. It announced the arrival of Slugger Masters, who would soon be boxing champion of the world, and issued a sneering challenge to all men who called themselves fighters, offering five hundred dollars cash to any man who could whip The Slugger.

The insinuating tone of the notice implied that nobody would be found in Johnstown with courage enough to fight for the prize. Reading it, Tom winced. No wonder Buck Bailey had been fighting mad.

NERVOUS and uneasy, Tom hurried to the hotel. Men stared at him with open hostility, and one muttered he'd change his tune when Buck Bailey got at him.

Their hotel room was empty. Lagger Lane's valise had been emptied on his bed, and Tom stared at some of the items. There were three different kinds of false hair, including a gray woman's wig. There was a woman's dress and bonnet, too. Lagger rushed inside before Tom could examine them. He was puffing furiously on his black cigar, and one of his rumpled coat pockets was bulging.

"This is going to be a sellout, Tom," he said, beaming. He frowned at the littered bed and moved his belongings hurriedly to the closet, hiding the woman's dress behind his spare shirts. "I've sold over a hundred tickets already, and I've only begun."

In spite of his worry, Tom was impressed. "Are they buying many of the five-dollar ones?"

Lagger winked. "They're *all* five dollar tickets when they sell like they did this morning." He reached into his coat pocket and brought out a fistful of bills. "Just to show how I trust you, Tom, you get the full fifty dollars right now, instead of having to wait for half. And here's the extra dollar you lent me."

"That reminds me," Tom said uncomfortably. "Why did you use my name?"

"You were in such a big rush to get out of here this morning, I didn't have a chance to give you instructions. I couldn't call you Dalvis when you were running around telling your own name." Lagger glared. "I thought fifty dollars would at least keep you on the job till I woke up."

Tom shifted nervously. "Lagger, I'll give you the fifty dollars back, and let's forget the whole thing."

"I suppose you think they'd let *me* forget it," Lagger said, black eyes bulging. "They'd think there was something crooked about it then, and I'd sure be in trouble. You could have refused to take the deal if you had

"Tell me, is there someone else?"

wanted to. I haven't asked you to do anything I didn't tell you about, have I?"

Tom shook his head. It was true enough, except that Lagger had made it sound a lot more casual and easy than it was turning out to be. But it wouldn't be fair to back out now. Tom sighed.

"I have a job over at the general store. I suppose you wouldn't mind if I told the boss and his daughter."

"I suppose I most certainly would," Lagger said indignantly. "Don't breathe a word to either one of them. Nature didn't build females to hold a secret, and those store owners are always thes biggest gossips in town. Keeping your mouth shut was part of the deal, and don't you forget it."

Cursing himself for getting into this mess, Tom went back to work. There was a steady parade into the store all afternoon, mostly people who wanted a look at him. Tom stayed hidden in the back. Moss Halliday didn't come back until close to sundown.

"I had a long talk with your manager, Tom," he said, his leathery face beaming. "He made me your official second for the fight. I'll be right in your corner watching you take the wind out of Bailey's sails." His chuckle sounded mellow. "Made some shrewd bets, at four-to-one odds, too."

Tom didn't know what to say. If Moss noticed how quiet he was, he didn't show it. Tom saw Peggy looking at him, her beautiful features sober and thoughtful. A short time later he heard her telling Moss she would lock up.

As soon as they were alone in the store, she came to face him. "I don't mean to pry, Tom," she said quietly, "but there's something wrong." The color deepened a shade in her fine features. "If there's any way I can help, I'd be happy to do it."

Her gentleness made him more miserable, made the deception seem even cheaper. In his confusion he reached out and grasped her shoulders. They were warm and relaxed under his hands, and he found himself looking right into her blue eyes.

"Please trust me, Peggy," he said. "Just tell Moss not to bet any more money on the fight."

Looking away, she nodded, and he hurried out. He found Lagger counting rows of greenbacks on the hotel bed, his black eyes glittering.

"Just two more days, Tom, and this'll all be mine."

"All I'm interested in is Slugger Dalvis getting here so I can straighten out this mess," Tom said, sickened by the sight of Lagger's greediness.

"He'll be here tomorrow, don't worry," Lagger snapped. "There's only one train, at two o'clock. I can't run a special in to get him here."

By noon the next day a boxing ring had been erected squarely in the middle of Main

Street. The workmen circled the ring posts with seven ropes. "To make sure you stay corralled in there with Buck," one of them said, grinning slyly at Tom.

Sick at the very thought of having to crawl into the ring with Bailey, Tom hurried to the store. He smelled trouble as soon as he spotted the tall gaunt man with a star on his chest talking to Moss Halliday. Peggy watched from nearby, with a troubled frown.

"I'll swear Tom didn't know a thing about this," Moss mumbled. The two came forward to face him. Moss's blue eyes squinted. "Tom, this is Sheriff Ben Lambert."

WHILE Tom waited, the gaunt sheriff gave him a long sour look. "When did you see your partner last?"

"This morning," Tom said, chilled with an ugly hunch of what had happened. "Why, what's wrong?"

"He's disappeared, that's what's wrong." The sheriff's suspicious eyes were on him all the while. "We got a wire to be on the lookout for him. He's pulled this tinhorn scheme before. He must have been watching for us, because he was gone when we got to the hotel."

"You mean there isn't going to be a fight?"

The gaunt sheriff answered with a nasty chuckle. "There'll be a fight, all right. And Buck Bailey'll get the five-hundred-dollar prize when he wins, too."

Tom frowned. "But if Lagger is gone, who'll—" He choked off.

"As long as you're here, it'll be taken care of," Sheriff Lambert said coldly. "And don't get any sneaking ideas about getting on that two o'clock train. We're going to be watching it."

Glancing at Peggy's anxious blue eyes, Tom swallowed hard. "I have to find Lagger." Whirling, he hurried out.

The hotel room was empty, but Lagger's spare shirts were still in the closet. Quickly, Tom ransacked the room, but found none of the money the little fight promoter had been gloating over the night before.

Although he had little hope, he scouted through the streets and saloons, searching desperately. Finally, knowing he was whipped, he ended up on Main Street, now almost deserted in the early afternoon. Shoulders slumped, he headed back toward the general store.

"Hey there, Tom! H-s-s-st!"

Tom jerked erect and looked around. There was no one in sight except a little gray-haired lady with a long-billed bonnet. Tom stiffened and stared. She was smoking a black cigar!

"Lagger!" Tom said, his heart hammering. "Is that you?"

"No, I'm my mother," said Lagger's disgusted voice from under the bonnet. "Damn, boy, why don't you get a megaphone and yell it down the street?"

"If you keep puffing on that cigar, I won't have to," Tom said, bristling at the sarcasm.

Lagger stiffened, and threw the butt furtively behind him. "Thanks. Habits betray a man. I like you, Tom, and I'm risking my neck to give you this warning. Run while you can!"

"I don't have anything to run from."

"Suit yourself. I'm making that two o'clock train."

"Here's news for you," Tom said happily. "Sheriff Lambert is going to be watching that train."

Lagger chuckled. "That goon? I have this act down so pat I could get him to help me into the coach without his getting wise."

"I suppose you have," Tom said, scowling. "You have that story about Slugger Dalvis memorized good too."

"Uh . . . Slugger was detained by circumstances beyond my control."

"I know," Tom said bitterly. "You couldn't help it that he was never born."

"Now, boy, that's no way to carry on."

"All I'd have to do is tell Sheriff Lambert," Tom muttered. "You'd be a cooked goose."

"That'd be fine gratitude for my trying to warn you."

Tom sighed. No matter what the situation was, Lagger always had the last answer.

When the train came in, Tom waited anxiously, thinking maybe Lambert would spot the trick. When the engine chugged out of town again, his last hope was gone.

In the back room of the general store, he told Moss and Peggy everything. Moss Halliday refused to be discouraged. "You'll take

the tuck out of that big windbag in nothing flat," he predicted. But Tom noted that Peggy looked almost as scared and helpless as he felt.

By late Saturday afternoon it was physical torture for him even to look at the ring in the middle of the street. But there was no way to back out of it without running away, and that would mean leaving Peggy Halliday for good. Tom winced at the thought. It would be less painful to let Buck Bailey knock his head off.

At dusk he stopped pacing the hotel room and went back to the store. He found Peggy alone in the back. She was crying.

"T-Tom, don't do it," she sobbed. Her wet blue eyes pleaded with him. "I'm really scared now."

"I wish I didn't have to," Tom said miserably, holding her hand, "but I do."

"It wasn't your fault that fighter didn't come. Why do you have to?"

"I don't know exactly," Tom said, confused. "I just know I do."

ELBOWING through the huge throng around the ring, minutes later, Tom wished he'd listened to her. The crowd was silent, watchful, their faces expectant under the flaming torch lights. Buck Bailey waited in the ring, stripped to the waist. Mountains of muscles stood out all over his hairy, massive body.

Tom swallowed. Fighting Bailey would be about as useless as beating at a rock cliff. Sheriff Ben Lambert crawled through the ropes, carrying a scarred pick handle.

"I'm the referee," he told them. "If either of you tries anything that wouldn't go in a saloon brawl, I'm wading in with this equalizer. Get to your corners now, and when I pound this on the floor, get up and have at it."

Tom went to the stool, his heart beating so hard he thought it would burst out of his chest. Moss patted his bare back. "Don't forget Buck fills up with bad whisky every night. Stay out of his way for awhile and—" The pick handle thumped the floor, and Tom jumped up, anxious to have it over.

Bailey charged, his thick arms pumping, and the crowd roared. Tom braced, swung once, and dropped to the rough planks under two jarring fists to his head. The knockdown ended the round. His head pounding, Tom staggered to the corner.

"I said keep away from him awhile," Moss whispered fiercely, mopping with a wet towel.

Tom tried, but it took more maneuvering than dodging a mad bull in a closed pantry. Bailey came at him in savage rushes, never letting him get set, driving home his heavy fists. Eleven straight times Tom hit the hard planks, ending the round, and staggered, hurt and bleeding, to his corner.

"He slowed up some that time," Moss said, but Tom knew it was false optimism. "Try to hit him in the belly. That'll help."

Tom ducked under the first bull rush and drove his right fist hard above Bailey's belt. It bounced off layers of rigid muscles, but Bailey sucked for air. Roaring, he came back with a mad charge, and Tom buckled under the savage drive of a massive shoulder. Sheriff Lambert hefted the pick handle, but made no move.

From then on it was a miserable nightmare. Tom shuffled awkwardly on legs heavy as iron, his chest burning for air, almost wishing Bailey would knock him out and get it over with. All he threw now were wild haymakers. They took the least effort, and they had good bargaining power when they landed. He lost count of rounds after the thirty-seventh, and it meant nothing that he was winning almost half of them now.

Between rounds, Moss bathed him with a wet towel which had long since turned crimson. "Just heard they caught that crooked promoter over at Twin Buttes." Moss chuckled. "He forgot himself and walked into a door marked, 'Men's'."

Tom stared straight ahead. All he cared about now was how he'd be able to get on his feet for the next round. The pick handle thumped unmercifully, and he plodded out to the center of the ring again. Bailey took a huge roundhouse swing at his head, missed, and flopped to the boards. His breath wheezed hoarsely, and he was slow getting up.

"See that?" Moss whispered triumphantly. "He never got in shape farming rocks like you did. He's about sunk."

"He's not alone," Tom muttered dully. "I don't think I can lift my arms any more."

The crowd had long since grown silent, their earlier enthusiasm for the fight gone. Once Tom glimpsed Peggy's face, white and tragic. Disgusted with the whole business then, he lunged at Bailey and dropped the big man with a straight right to the jaw.

Bailey's second came over after the round. "We think this fight has gone far enough, Halliday," he said. "The crowd's sick of it. Let's call it a draw, and all bets off."

"The hell with you birds," Moss said promptly. "My boy here is just getting his second wind. He's raring to go."

Inwardly, Tom winced. That last punch at Bailey had finished him, had used up the last of his reserve. Deep down he knew he was through, that he couldn't get off the stool to fight another round.

"How about you, Masters? You want to call it a draw?"

Tom shook his head. With energy enough to lift his head, he thought, he might have nodded.

Bailey's second went back to the corner. The pick handle thumped. Tom tried, but he couldn't get up.

"Get on your feet," Moss urged fiercely. "You got him whipped!"

Bracing himself, and with Moss lifting energetically from behind, Tom lurched to his feet and hung on the ropes. Bailey stayed slumped in his corner, not moving. While Tom gasped for breath, Lambert waited a moment, then came over and lifted Tom's hand. Tom was glad. He never could have done it himself.

The crowd gave a brief cheer, and then surged for the saloons. Tom was halfway to the watering trough before he noticed Peggy Halliday walking silently beside him. From the top of his head to his waist, he was one monstrous ache.

He soaked in the cold water a long time before the soreness started to leave. Then he sat on the edge of the trough, and Peggy sat beside him.

She was shivering. "Tom, please promise me you'll stop this awful fighting," she said. "I couldn't stand watching it again."

Tom waited a moment, as if thinking it over. "I think that's a good idea. I promise," he said, and pulled her closer.

Coming up in the next issue

GUNHAWKS DON'T RETIRE

Tom Carewe was out to avenge his brother's death . . . but he'd have to step lively if he didn't want to be the next to die

A Magazine-Length Novel

By PAUL L. PEIL

DOUBLECROSS CANYON

Ruck Farwell was on the dodge . . . with no chance to prove his innocence, and no right to want a woman like Luce Crockett

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

The Preacher in '49

DURING the days of the gold rush of 1849 in California, ministers had a hard time. Few Forty-Niners would stop searching for gold long enough to listen to a sermon. Besides, sermons were things that might stir up a guilty conscience. The "sky pilot," as the minister was then called, with nobody to listen to him, often ended up working in the diggings..

Sometimes religion had to be hammered in with the fist. Many of the pioneer parsons were good fighters and crack shots. They were brave men who felt the call. One "sky pilot" went through the diggings, mining by day and preaching at night. He had to threaten and bully his audience into attending his meetings. It was said that he was too violent for the pastorates in the East; but, in this rough land, he made men listen.

He finally wound up in a mining camp above Colfax, California, where the miners gave him a pineboard shanty to serve as church and residence, and guaranteed him a regular salary. He waited some time for the salary but it did not appear, and at last he was down to eating beans three times a day. Yet, gold was flowing freely through the miners' hands.

The hungry preacher at last hit upon a plan. He announced to the miners that on the following Sunday he would give out "a message of vital importance."

The next Sunday the church was filled to overflowing. He began services, and the audience noticed that when he called for a certain hymn and all stood up to sing, some big, husky miners moved as if signaled and took up positions near each window and door. They stood guarding doors and windows as the hymn ended and the minister began his sermon.

"My dear brethren, it's now a year since I showed up in this here pulpit and headed you toward the living pastures on the straight and narrow gospel trail. I've tried to ladle out the square truth as I caught it on my skirmishes through the Holy Writ; in my prayers I have shown no partiality.

"Now I'm going to talk business with you, after which I will drive ahead with the regular services.

"I want money. Now, I've stationed a bunch of big bruisers at the doors and windows, and the first inpenitent sinner that tries to make a sneak to the open air will be the leading character in a lively incident he will remember as long as he lives.

"A collection will now be taken up, and as I call each man's name I want to see him draw out his bag and empty some dust into the box."

He not only called out names, he told of strikes each man had made, and demanded a proportion of each strike in the name of the Lord. Not a single man refused.

The loot counted, the "sky pilot" signaled his guards at doors and windows, and they returned to their benches. The minister folded his hands.

"Brethern," he announced solemnly, "The text I have chosen for today is, 'I hungered and ye fed me.' "

a true story by **Beverly Darrell**

Part-Time Hero

By RAY GAULDEN

VANCE REGAN HAD his heart set on being a rodeo champion, and he made it . . . but it wasn't enough to satisfy his secret ambitions

THE FIRST time I saw him was during the rodeo at Denver. I was hanging around the stock pens, giving the boys a hand and watching the show from the fence.

"Are you Roy Mays?"

I looked around and he was standing there with a smile on his dark, handsome face. "I'm Vance Regan," he said. "I saw you a couple of years ago at Cheyenne when you made that ride on Midnight."

I looked back into the past and said, "That horse was a real bucker."

"But you rode him," Vance said, still smiling. "You stayed on him, and you stayed on a lot of others, too. You were all-around champion three years in a row."

"Just lucky," I said, looking out across the arena to where the clown in his straw hat and baggy pants was trying to get his mule up out of the sawdust. I'd seen it many times before, but I never got tired of watching.

"It was more than luck," Vance said. "I've talked with a lot of boys and they all say the same thing. Roy Mays was one of the greatest."

I felt a twinge of pain in my left hip, reminding me of the fall I'd taken at Pendleton. It didn't bother me much except when the weather was bad, but it kept me from riding and that was the part that hurt.

"Whatever it was," I said, smiling at him, "it didn't last. I haven't been on a bronc in over a year."

"You still have the savvy, though."

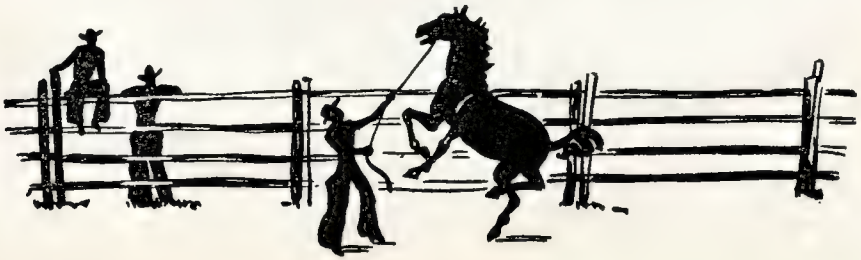
I had a hunch he was leading up to something, and then he told me what it was.

"I'm going to be the next world champion, and I want you to teach me the ropes."

I looked him over good, paying no attention to the roar of the crowd as a rider came out of the chutes on a Brahma bull. He was about twenty, the same age I had been when I started out. He was built the same, too—long and lanky. The only thing about him that bothered me was his eyes. They were dark and restless and there was something in them I couldn't name. Anyway, when you saw him smile you forgot about his eyes. And he smiled a lot.

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you, Vance?"

"I know what I want, and with your help I'll get it. I'll make it worth your while, too. I'll cut you in on the winnings." He stuck out his hand. "Is it a deal?"



Vance could always make a ride look good, even if he drew a bad horse

"I'll sleep on it," I told him.

He grinned as if he knew I wouldn't be able to turn him down.

AFTER the show I met my sister Dessie, and we had supper at the Silver Dollar Restaurant on Larimer Street. Some of the rodeo crowd came in, and most of them stopped to pass a few words, reminding me that I'd made a lot of friends during those years when I'd been riding high.

A redheaded cowboy from Texas smiled at Dessie and said, "Why don't you shake this yahoo and let me take you to the shindig tonight?"

"Fat chance," Dessie said, smiling back at the redhead. "Roy watches me like a hawk."

I looked at Dessie, thinking how pretty she was with the light shining in her russet-colored hair.

The redhead made a wry face. "Doesn't he know you're a big girl now?"

"I've tried to tell him," Dessie said, "but Roy's a hard man to convince."

I grinned at the redhead. "I'm onto you fancy riders."

The three of us laughed and, after slapping me on the back, the redhead went on.

"Dan ought to be here by now," Dessie said, glancing toward the door.

All at once I was uneasy, because I knew what Dan Kendell was coming for. He and Dessie had been seeing a lot of each other the past year, and now Dan had started talking about a partnership in that little ranch of his up in the mountains. He wanted me to quit the shows, take what money I'd saved, and throw in with him.

Dan was a man with both feet on the ground, steady and hard-working. He was in love with Dessie, and she seemed to like him a lot, too. But she never really said how she felt.

But, now that I'd met Vance, all I could think about was the chance he was giving me to go on being part of the show. I could teach him the tricks and maybe someday folks would say, "There's Vance Regan, the fellow Roy Mays showed how."

Dessie gave me a curious look. "Aren't you going to eat?"

I picked up my fork, but I didn't touch the food on my plate. I said, "Sis, would you be disappointed if I turned down Dan's proposition?"

"I don't want you to go into something you're not sure about, Roy."

She was always thinking of me, never of herself. But all I could think about was how it had been with me—the way the kids had admired me and the crowd had cheered when I came out on a bad one and stayed with him. And I remembered the people slapping me on the back and shaking my hand and telling me how good I was.

"Sis," I said, "I was figuring on this being my last show. Dan had me talked into a try at ranching, and maybe that would be the smart thing to do."

"Whoever said a bronc buster was smart?" Dessie asked with a grin.

I smiled, and then I got sober again. "A man offered me a deal today, a chance to keep following the shows."

"A man named Vance Regan?"

"How'd you know?"

"I met Vance when he was looking for you."

I said thoughtfully, "I have a hunch he has the makings, sis, so I'm going to throw in with him. But that doesn't mean you have to go along."

"Are you trying to get rid of me, big brother?"

She must have known that wasn't so. We'd been about as close as two people can be since the folks died. We'd looked after each other and had a good time together. It had been fun for a while, but I knew it might be a long time before Dessie found another man like Dan Kendell, who'd give her a home and the kind of life a girl ought to have.

"Like that redheaded cowboy said," I told her, "you're a big girl now and it's time you stopped chasing around the country with a broken-down bronc buster like me. There's no future in living in hotel rooms, a week here and a week there, with money one day and not knowing how you'll buy breakfast the next."

"If it's good enough for you, Roy, it's good enough for me."

"It's different with me. I'm a man—or anyway I used to be."

She frowned. "Don't start running yourself down. You're only thirty-nine and, even if you can't ride any more, there are plenty of other things you can do."

I had tried to see it that way, but it's not easy when you're wrapped up in something the way I was in the rodeos.

"What about Dan?" I asked.

She looked away from me. "I like him, Roy, but there's nothing serious between us."

It didn't occur to me that she might be lying.

THE NEXT day I threw in with Vance Regan, and already I was looking forward to the show at Fort Worth. The first time I saw Vance ride I knew he was a natural, that it wouldn't take long to make a champion of him.

In just one year he was up there at the top. Maybe the things I taught him didn't have much to do with it, but I figured I could take a little of the credit. Come show time, I'd help him at the chutes; then I'd sit on

the fence and watch him out in the arena. He knew how to make it look good, even when the horse he'd drawn wasn't a bad one. With his lanky body loose in the saddle, he'd wave his hat and give out a rebel yell.

It made me proud the way folks took to him, the way they'd cheer when he'd stick on the horse till the whistle blew. And how the kids loved him! He was their hero, a fellow they wanted to be like.

For a while everything was fine, except that Dessie didn't seem to be as happy as she used to. Maybe if I had given a little more thought to her, instead of always thinking of myself, it would have been different. Anyway, she and Vance were going together, and while nothing was said, I figured it wouldn't be long before they got married.

You couldn't help liking Vance Regan because he had a way about him, but sometimes I'd look into those restless eyes of his and get the feeling it was an act he was putting on, that down inside he was different.

He liked to gamble, and around a rodeo there's usually a crap game going. Wherever the dice were being thrown, you'd usually find Vance. At first he didn't go too far with it. He'd drop a few dollars now and then, and I'd josh him about it. And then he started hanging around the saloons, playing poker, and not spending much time with Dessie any more.

She tried not to let on that anything was wrong, but I'd catch her when she didn't know anybody was watching her, and there was a sadness in her eyes that worried me.

We went back to Denver that January, and everywhere you went there was talk of the big show. I met two riders on the street and they said, "Hi yuh, Roy? How's the boy?"

"Couldn't be better," I said.

"Regan going to win top money tomorrow?"

"Doesn't he always?"

One of them grinned and said, "I figure our chances are better this time."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Well, with the champ spending a lot of time in the Palace, maybe he's not in such good shape."

I smiled at them. "Don't get your hopes up, boys. Vance Regan will ride circles around the rest of you would-be cowboys."

I walked on, and my hip was aching the way it always did in cold weather. There was snow on the ground and I thought of the sunshine of Prescott, Arizona. Most of all I thought of sis sitting in a hotel room, waiting for Vance, while he was spending his time in a honkytonk. I passed the Windsor Hotel and Tom Berry, the man who had charge of the Denver show, was just coming out the door.

"Hello, Roy," Berry said. "Glad you're here."

He had white hair and the kindest gray eyes you ever saw. He was a man with a heart as big as the hat he was wearing.

I looked along Larimer Street. "I always had a liking for this mile-high city, Tom."

He put his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin. "This wouldn't be a bad place for a man to settle down in, Roy."

"Yeah, I had it in mind a while back."

"Before you teamed up with Vance Regan," Berry said soberly. "You're sold on him, aren't you, Roy?"

"Isn't everybody?"

"The folks that buy tickets are, anyway."

I had the feeling Tom wanted to say more, but he didn't.

He slapped me on the arm. "Good show at the Tabor Grand, Roy. Ought to take it in while you're killing time."

I nodded and went on down the street, walking through the slush until I came to the Palace. The barroom was crowded, but I found Vance at a table in the corner. He was playing poker with a man who wore black clothes and had the look of a professional gambler about him. There were just the two of them at the table, but several men were standing around, watching the game.

"How's it going, Vance?" I asked idly.

He muttered something without looking up from his cards, and I took a closer look at him. His eyes were red and his mouth was sullen. Then I noticed the bottle on the table beside him—a quart bottle that was almost empty. I looked at the stacks of chips in front of the gambler, and at the few in front of Vance.

"How many cards?" the gambler asked.

"Two," Vance said, his voice thick. "Just two, Conners, and make them good."

Conners smiled. "Your luck's bound to change."

HE DEALT the cards, smooth and easy, and I watched Vance reach for them with hands that weren't steady. He slid them to the edge of the table and picked them up. I could tell by the way a muscle jerked in his face that the cards weren't the ones he wanted.

"I check the bet," he said.

Conners smiled again as he slid a stack of chips to the center of the table. "It'll cost you a hundred dollars to see mine."

Vance cursed and threw his hand down, while the gambler raked in the pot.

"What do you say, Regan?" Conners asked.

"Deal 'em," Vance said, reaching for the bottle.

The gambler was still smiling. "Those chips won't see you through another hand."

Vance reached in his pocket, then took his hand out and looked up at me. "Let me have a hundred bucks, Roy."

I laughed at that. "You know I don't carry that kind of money around with me."

Something mean crawled into Vance Regan's eyes. "You have it in your money belt, Roy, so don't hand me that."

I felt the gambler watching me, but my eyes stayed on Vance. "Why don't you call it a night?"

He shook his head stubbornly. "I'm staying here till I get ready to leave."

"The show starts tomorrow, Vance."

He sneered. "I can ride those broncs and catch up on my shut-eye at the same time."

"Even a bronc like Tonto Red?"

"Has any of them thrown me yet?"

"Not yet," I said. "But you've never drawn a killer like that red stallion."

"I'll ride him into the ground," he said, putting his shoulders back as he looked around at the crowd. "I'm Vance Regan, the best damn bronc stomper who ever was born."

"Sure you are, Vance," I said, trying to be patient. "But if you figure to ride tomorrow, you'll have to get that booze soaked out of you."

He let me see the meanness in his eyes again. "I'm getting a little sick of you, Roy."

I tried to tell myself it was just the mood he was in, the booze talking in him. I said, "Come on, Vance. Dessie's waiting for you at the hotel."

"I told you I wasn't ready to leave yet, and I asked you for a hundred dollars. You going to let me have it?"

I shook my head.

His mouth pulled tight, and he turned to the crowd. "What do you think of that?" he said to no one in particular. "I make the money and I cut him in for sitting on the fence watching me."

"You made the deal, Vance. It wasn't me."

"I made it because I felt sorry for you, not because I needed you. Why, I've forgotten more about riding horses than you ever knew."

I looked into his hot eyes and said, "Those kids that call you a hero ought to get a look at you now."

The temper broke loose in him then and he came to his feet, banging against the table, kicking his chair out of the way. Two steps and he was close to me, so close that I could smell the whisky on his breath.

"Cool off, Vance," I said.

"You damned has-been," he said between his teeth.

I didn't see his fist coming, but it landed on my mouth and knocked me back against the wall. I stayed there for a minute with my head whirling, feeling the warm seep of blood from my lips.

Vance was still there by the table, his fists clenched, his head pushed forward. When he started toward me, Conners, the gambler said, "Forget it."

Vance stopped and glanced at the crowd. Some of them were scowling, making it plain they didn't like what he'd done.

"Your credit's good," Conners said. "Let's play cards."

At first I was mad and I almost tied into him, but I knew that wouldn't do any good, so I got hold of myself. He'd been losing at poker and that, along with the whisky, had made him mean, caused him to do something he'd be sorry about when he sobered up.

I wiped the blood from my mouth and went over to the bar. When I looked back at the table, the men who had been watching the game had drifted away and there was just Vance and the gambler. I ordered a drink and stood there holding it, remembering what Vance had said about feeling sorry for me.

A man moved up beside me and said, "Hello, Roy."

I turned around and Dan Kendell was standing there with a smile on his square face. We shook hands and I asked, "You down for the show?"

He nodded. "Never miss it."

I bought him a drink and, with the glass in his hand, he said without looking at me, "How's Dessie?"

"Fine," I said, turning my glass around on the bar. "Couldn't be better."

Vance Regan came along. I was to blame for breaking them up, and thinking about it now didn't make me feel good.

"How's the ranch doing?" I asked absently.

"So so."

"Maybe I made a mistake not taking you up when you offered me that partnership deal, Dan."

"The offer's still open, Roy."

I turned my glass slowly, not looking at him, wondering if I could be satisfied living on a ranch after all these years of following the

"It loses something in the translation."

"That's good." He tried to make it sound light, but I glanced at him and saw the yearning in his eyes that told me he'd never forgotten her.

I picked my glass up and then set it back on the bar without tasting the whisky. "I'm lying to you, Dan," I said sourly. "Sis hasn't been herself for months now."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Roy."

I stared into the whisky glass, remembering how it had been with him and Dessie before rodeos. I wondered about Dessie. Could she take up where she'd left off with Dan, or had she fallen too hard for Vance? She'd gone with Vance and nobody else for a long time now.

"You'll be at the stockyards tomorrow, won't you, Dan?"

He nodded.

"I'll see you," I said, "and maybe I'll take you up on that offer. I don't know yet."

I finished my drink and started to turn

away. Then I stopped and said, "Dessie's at the hotel, Dan. Why don't you drop by and see her?"

"Maybe I'll do that."

ON MY way out I glanced at the card table, and the expression on Vance Regan's face told me that his luck was still running bad. I reached up and touched my mouth where he had hit me, and I wondered if it were something he'd been wanting to do for a long time.

When I got back to the hotel I went to Dessie's room, but I didn't tell her what had happened at the saloon. "You'd better get yourself prettied up a little," I said.

"Are you taking me out?" she asked.

"No, but I met an old friend of yours, and he said he might stop by. "

"Dan Kendell?"

I nodded, liking the way her face lighted up. Then she turned away from me and said in a troubled tone, "You shouldn't have told him where I was."

"Why?"

"You know how things are with Vance and me."

"Not good," I said, watching her closely. "You're not happy, and you haven't been for quite a spell."

She still didn't look at me. "You're imagining things, Roy."

"No. For the first time since I teamed up with Vance, I can see there are things going on besides what's happening out there in the arena."

"What do you mean, Roy?"

My eyes were steady and searching. "Vance has made it plain that you're his girl and that he doesn't want anybody else fooling around you." I waited a little and then I asked, "Are you afraid of him, sis?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not afraid of him, Roy."

"Then what is it?" I said, scowling at her. "Something's eating on you."

She came over to me then and put her hands on my shoulders. "Everything will be all right. I've just been down in the dumps."

I had a feeling she wasn't giving it to me straight, and it was still on my mind when I went to my room and turned in. Lying there in the darkness, I thought about Dessie and about Vance, and I remembered what he had said to me before he hit me in the mouth.

The next day I didn't go out to the stockyards until almost time for the evening show. Vance was back of the chutes, talking with some of the other contestants. As soon as I got there, he pulled me aside.

"I'm sorry about last night, Roy. My luck was all bad and I had too much booze in me."

"It's all right, Vance."

He smiled and slapped me on the back, and even though he seemed to have trouble looking me in the eye, I felt good again. I had come out here hoping we could patch it up, hoping Dessie and I could go on following the shows with him. And now we could.

Waiting for the show to start, I went up front and had a cup of coffee. The stadium was packed, every seat filled and people standing along the railing.

A kid selling peanuts grinned when I passed and said, "Hello, Roy."

I lifted my hand to him and went on, but I heard him saying, "That's Roy Mays, Mister. He used to be the all-around champion cowboy."

The words stirred a warm feeling in me and brought back a lot of memories.

When I came to Tom Berry's little office, he called to me from the open doorway. "Come in and sit a minute, Roy."

Putting on a show like the one at Denver took a lot of Tom's time, but he was never too busy to stop and talk with his friends. We'd spent a lot of hours together, swapping rodeo talk.

"Looks like you have a full house out there, Tom."

He nodded, but I could tell his mind was on something else. "Heard about what happened at the Palace last night, Roy."

"It wasn't anything," I said. "Vance just had a few too many under his belt."

Tom shook his head. "He was just showing his true colors, Roy."

"What are you driving at?" I asked, frowning.

"I know how much this business means to you, Roy, how much you hate to give it up. But it's time you were thinking about it."

"Stop beating around the sage, Tom."

"All right, Roy, I'm going to tell you because I can't stand to see it go on any longer. Vance has been using you right from the start to put him in good with Dessie."

I stared at him.

"It's the truth, Roy. Vance has shot off his mouth more than once to some of the boys, but they've kept it quiet."

I sat there, knowing now how it was and how it had been from the first. Dessie didn't love Vance, but she was sticking with him because of me, because she knew when she left him he'd throw me over.

When I started for the door, Tom said, "You've had your day, Roy, so don't let it get you down."

I didn't answer. A man came in with the ticket sale money and I left, walking heavily toward the back of the stadium. Why did somebody have to tell me what was going on before I could see it? I'd been carried away with making a champion of Vance Regan, wrapped up in myself and living only in that arena out there.

Vance had told me he was sorry, but I knew now that he had done that so he could hold onto Dessie. He didn't love her, but he wanted her around. He'd end up hurting her bad.

THE SHOW was getting under way, and I heard the announcer's voice coming through the megaphone. "Jack Hall coming out of Chute Number One on Sweet Dreams."

I worked my way through the crowd back to the runway behind the chutes. Riders were here, waiting their turn, and I spoke to one of them.

"Seen Vance?"

"He was around a minute ago."

When I started on, the rider laughed. "Maybe Vance got to thinking about trying to ride that Tonto Red, and decided to hightail it."

I went on down the runway, past the pens that held the bucking stock. Some of the alleyways were dimly lighted, but I spied Vance near the back of the building. All I had was a glimpse before he ducked outside.

I hesitated a minute and then followed him, wondering why he would be going somewhere when he had a ride coming up. He was walking fast, and staying close to the building as if he didn't want to be seen. Without stopping anywhere, he went to the front of the stadium and turned back inside.

More puzzled than ever, I followed him through the gates, and then I lost him in the crowd. After looking around the concession stands, I gave up and started back to the chutes. When I came to Tom Berry's little office, the door was open and I could see Tom lying on the floor.

I ran in and knelt down by him, and then saw the blood on the back of his head. "Tom," I said, afraid that he was dead.

He opened his eyes a little. "That you, Roy?" His voice was weak, not much more than a whisper.

"What happened, Tom?"

When he spoke, I had to lean close to catch the words. "Vance hit me with something and took the ticket sale money."

He was gone then and I stayed there a few minutes, trying to decide what to do. From beyond the doorway came the sound of the crowd, people watching the show and enjoying themselves and not thinking about murder.

I didn't know why Vance had done it, why he needed the money that bad, but I could guess. Last night he had lost plenty to that gambler—no telling how much—and Conners might be putting the pressure on him. Or maybe it was something that had been in Vance's mind ever since that time I'd mentioned to Tom that he ought to be careful about leaving a lot of money lying around.

It had been easy for Vance to pull it off while the show was going on. With all the activity back of the chutes, no one would miss him, and he wouldn't have to be gone long. He could hide the money back there in one of the alleyways and get it later.

I left the office and walked back toward the chutes, telling myself that I was the only one who knew what had happened. Two youngsters were sitting in the front row of seats and when I passed one of them was saying, "Wait till Vance Regan comes out. Then you'll really see something."

"Yeah," the other boy said, "Vance is the best cowboy in the world."

I thought of what it would do to those kids

and thousands of others like them if they found out Vance Regan wasn't the hero they believed him to be.

I walked on and there was a sick, empty feeling inside me. When I got back to the chutes, Vance was there, putting on his chaps and getting ready to ride, just as if nothing had happened. Killing a man didn't seem to bother him much. Then I remembered the thing in his eyes that had bothered me from the first.

They were trying to get Tonto Red up to the chute, and I went over to give them a hand. The big stallion fought every foot of the way, kicking and squealing. I got the saddle, but it took three of us to get it on him. And all the time I worked, I was thinking of an old man back there with his head bashed in.

When we had the horse ready Vance climbed up, but I could tell he was uneasy. But he had to make the ride, act as if nothing had happened. I avoided his eyes when he looked at me.

I heard someone saying, "Better watch him, Vance. He'll kill you if he gets a chance."

"He won't get the chance," Vance said.

The crowd was quiet, waiting, and then came the announcer's voice. "Ladies and Gentlemen, keep your eyes on Chute Number Two. Vance Regan, world's champion cowboy, is coming out on Tonto Red, the horse that's never been rode."

You can't turn Vance over to the law, I thought. You can't spoil it for those kids out there.

The chute gate swung open and Tonto Red came out. On his back was the man who could ride him if anybody could. The big stallion went up on his hind legs, pawing the air, almost going over backward. He came down and headed toward the center of the arena, bucking all the way.

Vance Regan stayed with him, bringing the crowd to their feet as he yelled and waved his hat. He was giving them a ride to remember. It was a fitting climax, I thought, as I sat on the fence with the cheers ringing in my ears.

Somewhere a woman screamed, and then Vance was down in the dirt and the big stallion called Tonto Red was above him, rearing, plunging.

Vance Regan, world's champion cowboy, and the idol of the kids, had made his last ride. There was a lot of talk about it, but they never found out who cut the cinch that caused his saddle to come loose.

And they never had a chance to ask me. Right after that I quit rodeoing for good. If anyone wants to find me now, they'll have to go to Dan and Dessie Kendell's ranch, high in the peaceful mountains of northern Colorado.

RANCH
FLICKER
TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

●

Featuring a Review of 20th Century-Fox's

SEVEN CITIES OF GOLD

starring

MICHAEL RENNIE and RICHARD EGAN

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

SUSAN HAYWARD

EVERYONE knows about Jesse James and Billy the Kid, and most people recognize the fact that the gunmen of the West were just plain criminals—a little more glamorous maybe, but no more admirable than the criminals of today.

Not so many people have heard of Joaquin Murrieta, and those who have will probably defend him as the Robin Hood of early California.

They say that in his first two exploits he killed at least 28 men, every one of them for revenge. But still he was a hero.

They say his right-hand man had the itchiest finger and the most bloodthirsty knife in the far West, but Three-Finger Jack was true to Joaquin, so he was a hero too.

They say he robbed unwary travelers and abducted beautiful young women. He jumped claims, rustled cattle; he was a master bushwacker and he was worth $5,000 dead or alive to the law, even in those days. But Joaquin remains, to some people, as big a hero as Davy Crockett.

Joaquin is the only man we know of who went from rodeo into a spectacular life of crime. It wasn't rodeo as we know it today, but a traveling circus-rodeo to entertain the miners during the California gold rush.

As the story goes, young, black-haired handsome Joaquin Murrieta left the rodeo at a river bank and did some panning for himself. His lovely young wife was with him when they were attacked by five miners. When Joaquin came to, his wife was dead. He buried her, swearing revenge. A few days later each of the five miners was found with a bullet hole in his heart and the letter M carved in his forehead.

Then Murietta joined forces with his brother Jesus, who later was unjustly lynched by twenty-five men. It took a month or more before Joaquin could catch up with the lynchers. He shot, and later carved his initial on, 23 of them.

The 24th was hanged as a murderer and the 25th killed in a street fight before Joaquin could get to them.

By that time, Joaquin was famous—as well he might be. His legend grew, and his band of followers grew with every telling of his story, until it reached a strength of 400 men. They plundered California, stealing from the wicked rich and scattering the spoils among the worthy poor.

The law, however, had no sympathy for Joaquin. The murder of a judge, who was shot down in Los Angeles, was added to Joaquin's list of crimes, and this brought out a sheriff who swore to track him down. The sheriff's name was Harry Love, but it was the hate in his heart that kept him going all the long months of his search.

Joaquin was a marvelous rider. His horse was a golden palomino, and he rode circles around Sheriff Love. Joaquin was also a marvelous actor. He would disguise himself and have long conversations with Love concerning the whereabouts of Joaquin, before he rode off laughing.

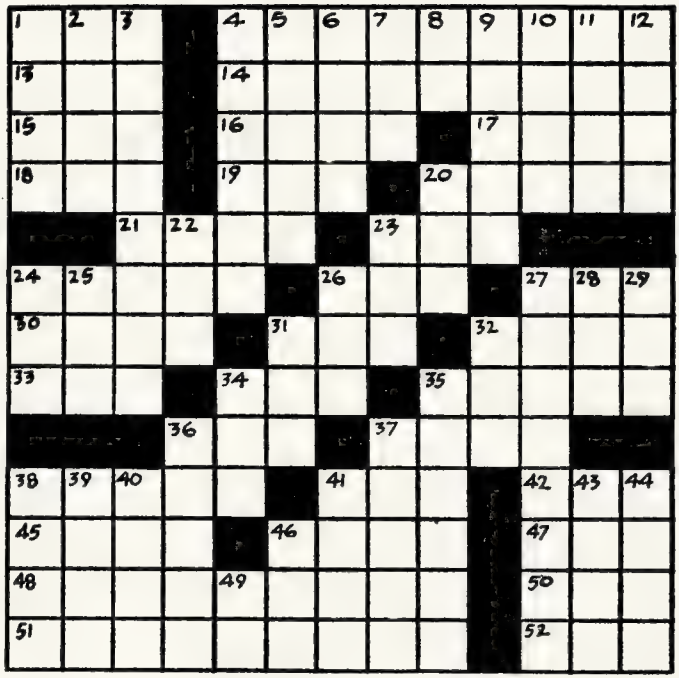
Finally, it was a rejected woman who tipped off Love as to Joaquin's hide-out. The sheriff took him completely by surprise, but Joaquin still managed to reach his horse and ride away.

But his horse was without saddle or bridle, and Joaquin was unarmed. Still the outlaw led the lawman a merry chase, and there are plenty of people who will dispute how it ended—even though Love came back to Los Angeles with seemingly undisputable evidence of Joaquin's death.

People will still tell you of seeing a bareback rider going like the wind toward the hills of California.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 To damage
4 Western shrubby plant
13 Night before Xmas
14 To utter words
15 Wrongdoing
16 Burden
17 White patch on horse's face
18 Orange drink
19 One who does (suffix)
20 Shop
21 Fence opening
23 — Rogers, cowboy
24 Cowboy garment
26 Is able to
27 Garden tool

J	E	T		L	O	C	O		T	R	A	P	
A	R	E		I	R	O	N		H	O	N	E	
B	R	A	H	M	A	S		R	I	A	T	A	
			O	I	L		S	O	R	R	E	L	
F	L	I	R	T		S	P	U	D				
A	I	D	S		R	O	U	T		D	I	M	
M	A	L	E	T	A		R	E	M	U	D	A	
E	R	E		O	N	E	S		A	D	E	S	
			S	I	G	H		S	N	E	A	K	
C	A	T	T	L	E		G	E	T				
A	C	R	E	S		R	U	N	A	W	A	Y	
T	H	E	E		A	I	L	S		I	C	E	
S	E	E	R		L	O	P	E		N	E	T	

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

30 Military assistant
31 In what way
32 Group of cattle
33 The letter T
34 Dog's foot
35 Mothers of colts
36 Chestnut horse
37 One's residence
38 To train, as soldiers
41 And not
42 Enemy
45 Capital of Italy
46 Fortified place
47 Unmatched
48 Spotted horse
50 Fishing pole
51 Native of the West
52 Thirsty

DOWN

1 Western plateau
2 Greedy
3 Vicious horse
4 Divides lengthwise
5 Ascended
6 Farm animal
7 To finish
8 Branch office (abbr.)
9 Coated with rust
10 To
11 Wound mark
12 In this place
20 Male relative
22 Monkey
23 Uncooked
24 Mouser
25 To hasten
26 Calf's mother
27 White-faced steer
28 Metallic rock
29 Editors (abbr.)
31 It's for horses
32 Sandwich meat
34 Buddy
35 Building material
36 Lamb's cry
37 Palomino
38 "Quick on the —"
39 Lasso
40 Little devils
41 Midday
43 Smell
44 Whirlpool
46 In behalf of
49 French article

Seville was scrambling up the piled rocks above the river bed

WILD BLOOD

By Dorothy Ross

DUREN WICKES pulled the wagon off to the side of the trail. This was where the Sulphur River spread out from the mouth of the high narrow canyon. The ground was soggy with mud, a marsh covered with a growth of coarse grass. The girl, Seville, pointed forward to an overhanging cliff.

"It would be dry and sheltered there."

Duren did not answer. He moved the wagon under the cliff side, unhitched the mules, and staked them out. Seville started a small blaze with carefully hoarded kindling taken from the dried hide slung under the wagon bed. When the young man came to the fire, she spoke without looking up.

SEVILLE WAS a pirate's granddaughter . . . and a girl

like that can make her way, even in the rugged West

"Looks like the river's rising fast. I wish John and Emmy had kept up with us."

Duren was tall and blond. He stood with his hands shoved down into his pockets, watching her with the remote look that was always in his blue eyes when he glanced her way. As if, she thought with a held-back anger, as if he doesn't know I'm here.

"They'll be along," he said and, turning to the wagon, he reached for his gun from its sling above the driver's seat. "This seems like good hunting country. I'll see if I can get us some fresh meat."

The wagons had been more than four months on the trail when they reached the orange-yellow waters of Sulphur Creek. Duren Wickes and Seville were far ahead of the second wagon when they passed through the deep-cut canyon that was the river's bed. Some emigrant who had explored before them had placed a sign by a faintly marked trail sloping off to the right. It read, in big straggly letters, TAR SPRING. GREASE UP.

Seville walked up the trail a little way. It was a tangle of wild rose bushes, pink with blossom. There were currants, too, and service bushes covered with berries which would soon be ready to pick. It was as pretty a place as Seville had seen since leaving home, and it was with regret that she turned to leave it when she heard the sound of Duren's gun.

When she came back to the camp, she saw that he had brought in a fat mountain sheep. There would be plenty of meat for them all when John and Emmy came down the Sulphur.

Back home, in the little fishing village on the coast of Maine, people said that Seville Marks was a direct descendent of Spanish freebooters who had settled there a hundred years ago or more. The original name of Marquez had gradually become Marks, but the gossips said that anyone could tell Seville was a Marquez just by looking at her.

Bent over their quilting frames, the women would say, "How Emma Wickes can stand to have that girl around the house, looking slantwise at her husband, the dear only knows. There isn't a man in the country safe from her."

Seville knew very well what they said; they said worse things too. But she would toss back the mane of her lovely hair and turn her threatening black eyes on them, smiling secretly to see the malicious tattlers shrink away from her to a silence that was half shame, half fear. She loved Emma Wickes, who had been kind to her, much kinder than most. If she had fallen in love with Emmy's husband, she would never have let him know. For Seville had a deep loyalty to those she loved.

NOW, with Duren, it was a different story. John's brother, big, blond, and placid, was fair game. Seville plagued him unmercifully, relishing the slow red of anger that would rise in his fair cheeks. He would fix his blue eyes on her and then look away, as if she were no bigger than a gnat on the horizon. Seville had never made much headway with Duren, but she promised herself that she would, one of these days.

That was why, when John and Emmy were caught in the madness of the gold rush, Seville decided to accept their offer and go with them. It took time to make up her mind. The Wickes were taking two wagons, and it was only after she had heard that Duren would be driving the second wagon that Seville was quite sure she wanted to go.

The truth was, she admitted wryly to herself, she couldn't resist it. The one man who never even bothered to look at her was going away, and it seemed to Seville that all the life of Penscob would go with him. She would miss him so much because she just had to have someone to conquer, and, in his calm way, Duren Wickes had steadily held out against her.

"Do come," Emmy had said. "It's going to be mightly lonely for me if you don't. This way the two men can sleep in one wagon, and you and I and little Richard in the other. It will be like home, having you for company."

So it was settled, and Seville gave a year's lease on her cottage and land to Ben Harris, who had always been greedy for it. I might as well make some money on the journey, she thought. Almost everyone who was set on going to the gold fields sold their home and belongings for a trifle, just to get away.

Seville didn't want to sell, just yet. She would give herself the space of a year's time

to make Duren Wickes fall in love with her. If he didn't, she would come back to the old place to live.

Four months later Duren still would not even smile at Seville when she spoke to him, and she was about ready to turn around and go back home. Plenty had done that, long before they reached the deep narrow canyon where the Bear and Sulphur Rivers met.

AT THE camp, Seville looked curiously at the mountain sheep Duren was working on. It was the first she had ever seen. "Can't you save the pelt?" she asked. "It would make a nice warm mat."

"Plenty more where that came from." Duren rammed his skinning knife into the ground to clean off the blade. "The mountains are full of birds, too. This is good country, after what we've been seeing."

"I wish John and Emmy would get through." Seville glanced up the canyon. "Just look at that river, Duren. It's a flood now. Maybe they're in trouble."

"It'll be full dark soon," Duren said. "They'll have made camp early. John would never take such a risk."

But he spoke with a lurking doubt in his voice. His brother would cheerfully take any risk, and he knew it. Uneasily he watched the foaming white of separate streams sluicing over the canyon side to join the swollen river. The crash of dislodged and rolling rocks mingled with a continuous growl of far-off thunder, and there was a sudden spurt of warm rain.

The snow would be melting in the mountains; if there were a flash flood, this deep narrow cut could become a death trap. Surely John would not try to fight through it tonight, Seville thought.

She pushed back the inky blackness of her soaked hair and said, "There isn't a thing we can do but wait."

Duren turned his contemptuous eyes on her. "You can wait. I'm going to take one of the mules and ride up river. Maybe they could use some help."

Standing there, shivering, wet, and in the grip of a fear which she struggled to control, Seville watched Duren as the tall young man went stoically about his preparations. That he was taking a terrible risk, she knew, but probably nothing she could say would dissuade him. He would only ignore her, as he always did. She clenched her fist, wishing with all the leashed violence of her nature that she could beat him into submission.

Duren threw harness on the strongest mule, hung it with chain traces and coiled rope, and double-folded a heavy blanket for a saddle. The mule fought the unfamiliar pack, and Duren shouted for Seville to hold the animal's head while he tightened the cinch. She caught the halter.

"If you try to get over those slick boulders," she said, "you'll end up with a broken leg."

He shrugged and said nothing, and she added with a cutting venom, "We can afford to lose you. Men are cheap. But we sure can't afford to lose a mule."

He took notice of her then, for once, turning on her and shouting that John Wickes had never made a bigger mistake than when he asked Seville to come along. "You're willing to let them drown!" he raged. "And why not? Your own grandfather was a murdering pirate! What's life to a Marquez?"

Startled at the loud voice, the mule pulled back, tearing the halter from Seville's hands. The girl let it go. She came close to Duren and reaching up, slapped him hard across the mouth. He grabbed her, crushing both her hands in one of his and pulling her tight against him, saying jumbled words that she could not understand. She only realized that there was fury in them, and a strange mixture of both love and hate.

It was then she saw the tumbling body in the river, and tore herself away. "Look!" she screamed, "Duren, look over there!"

It almost seemed alive, throwing itself to one boulder, sliding off and around and down against another. Only the arms did not cling, nor did the hands try to hold, and the limbs tossed loosely at the mercy of the boiling current. Seville dropped to her knees and covered her eyes against the sight of John's body being dragged from the flood.

AFTER a while, sick and shaken, she got to her feet and went to where Duren was standing. He had wrapped a heavy yellow slicker round his brother and

had laid him between the fire and the sheltering cliff. Seville looked, but dared not speak.

Duren shook his head. "He's gone. I don't think he was drowned." Duren's voice was strange, dull and monotonous. He added, "It was his head—bleeding, crushed against a rock, I reckon."

He was dazed, trembling, so evidently unable to pull himself together that Seville gripped him by the arms and shook him with all her strength.

"Emmy," she cried. "We must find Emmy and Richy."

The black mule was standing with the others; she ran to him, caught a trailing rope, and led him back to the fire. "Get up," she ordered Duren. "You can ride upstream; maybe you can find out what's happened to the wagon. Oh, Duren, if only Emmy and the baby are still alive!"

He stared at her in uncomprehending silence and she screamed at him, "Duren, wake up. We *must* try. Wait, I'll go. Get me on the mule. Help me!"

He came to then. "Don't be a fool, Seville. I'm all right now. I just couldn't think for a minute, somehow." He took the rope and coiled it, mechanically careful, and mounted the mule. "Keep the fire going, Seville. If I find them they'll need it."

She clenched her teeth. "I'm going too. I'll climb along the canyon side above the water. I can go where you and the mule couldn't."

"You'll fall," he protested. "You're crazy, Seville. You'll kill yourself."

"Don't you understand?" she cried out. "I must know. I can't wait here doing nothing. And maybe there's some way I can help."

"Don't be a fool," Duren said angrily.

But she scarcely heard the words; already she was scrambling up the piled rocks above the deep cut of the river bed. And an instant later Duren forced the mule into the water, keeping as close as he could to the shelter of the canyon side.

Sometimes Seville's only way led high above him; sometimes she was able to descend almost to the level of the river. It was worse then, for she dared not glance down at the blackness of rushing water. It set her head spinning with a dizziness that drew her to it, and looking at it was more terrible than climbing the jagged rocks higher up on the canyon.

The continuous roar of the flood drugged her into a feeling of detachment so that although she was aware that her hands were a sticky agony, she only wondered vaguely why this should be so. She did not realize that the stickiness was blood.

The rain stopped. A pale watery moon showed through racing clouds, and twice Seville saw the black mule stumble and fall forward. But each time it recovered its footing, and Duren's hands on the bridle were pulling its head above water.

THEN she lost them for a while as she found her way blocked by a huge outjutting boulder. Try as she might, she could not pass behind it. She finally nerved herself to crawl over, clinging with bleeding and torn hands, and in terror of the current below. A few yards upstream Duren had halted. He was waving, and pointing ahead.

The wagon lay tipped on its side, well down the river from the entrance to the canyon. It was half submerged, and was being pushed by the current against a huge mass of rock in the center of the stream. Two of the great wheels showed above the water; the hoops holding the canvas top were pushed out of shape, but seemed unbroken. Pinned down by the pitch of the wagon and in a tangle of harness and floating logs, the dead bodies of the six-mule team bobbed in the water as if they were still attempting to escape.

The flash flood had passed its peak, and now subsided as quickly as it had risen. Seville climbed wearily down to the river edge, thinking how innocent the treacherous water seemed in the lifting dawn. Duren forced the big mule toward the capsized wagon. The animal snorted and shied away from the drowned team, but finally stood trembling and quiet while being tied to one of the wheels. From there Duren climbed to the driver's seat, then to the opening of the canvas top.

For a long and terrible moment Seville waited. It was difficult for her to breathe, and she felt very cold. When she heard Duren shout, a sudden nervous shudder shook her, so strong that her muscles tightened in a

painful constriction. She saw his head appear at the canvas flap.

"Seville," he called, "can you wade through to here? Richie's alive. I want you to get him. Go slow. Be very careful."

Go slow? How could she go slow! She ran into the river and fell, sprawling to her knees. Scrambling up, she plunged on, while a voice kept telling her, you must be careful, you must be careful. Suddenly she knew it was her own voice she heard, and she went more slowly.

She saw Duren climb out of the wagon and cling to the driver's seat. He had something in his arms—a wooden box. She thought, but where's Richie? She tried to hurry again, splashing through the water, her soaked skirts heavy about her. Breathless, she reached up for the box Duren held out.

"It's the baby," he said. "He's alive. He's all right."

"Emmy!" she gasped. "What happened to Emmy?"

"She—" Duren stopped and unashamed tears came to his eyes. "She kept Richie above water all night, I guess. I held on to her, and she said something about John pitching out when the wagon upset. I told her we had found him. And she looked straight at me, as if she knew. Maybe she did"—Duren choked—"because she said, real quiet, 'You and Seville take good care of the baby.' She's dead, Seville. She died right then, in my arms."

For an instant it seemed to Seville that the whole world was turning over. All she could see was the glitter of sunshine on swirling water, and she steadied herself by staring at the boy. Only a baby, she thought, less than six months old, and alone.

The child was blue with cold, and she took him out of the box and, tearing open her bodice, held him tight against her, hoping that, even soaked as she was, some of her warmth would reach him. Because she knew how little she could help the boy, she began to sob helplessly.

•

SOMEONE shouted then, and Duren was shouting too. Seville saw the wagons, coming slowly down the Sulphur River, some in the stream bed and others on the narrow trail uncovered by the receding water. One of the strangers tried to take Richie away from her.

Only half conscious, she still cried out, "No, no! Leave him alone," and clung desperately to the child.

Duren's arms came around her then. "It's all right, Seville. Everything's all right now." He lifted her into the first wagon.

A woman's voice said, "Poor thing. "Lay her here."

The jolting wagons moved on down stream to the camping place under the cliff.

The wagon train camped there for two days. The men drove up the side trail to the tar springs, where they greased wheel hubs and filled their tar buckets. Or they hunted the wild sheep, while the women picked the early ripened berries to stew as a relish with the welcome fresh meat. But both men and women fretted over wasted time and soon made ready to pull out, while Seville and Duren watched in silence.

Duren made no preparations for the trail. "We haven't a thing but what was in our wagon," he told Seville. "Everything else was washed away or ruined by the flood. I have exactly six bits in my pocket, and that's all. I'm stumped, Seville."

She nodded. "I know. About all I have is the clothes I stand up in. What shall we do, Duren?"

"Looks like we can't go backward or forward. And there's Richie. Maybe—" he hesitated—"well, there's a woman in the train who wants to take him."

"Emmy gave him to me," Seville said quickly.

"She gave him to me too," Duren retorted, "and I intend to keep him."

Seville didn't say a word. She just looked at him and laughed, openly enjoying the angry rush of color to his cheeks.

"All right," he shouted, "so we'll keep him. And we can't go on, and we can't go back. So what shall we do about that?"

"Stay here," Seville said placidly, "at least for a while. Remember how good the mountain sheep tasted, after weeks without fresh meat? The mountains are full of them—and wild chickens, too. You're a fine hunter, Duren. There are fish in the river, and

currants and service berries in the canyons that I can cook. There are plenty of travelers going west who will pay for meals like that—and pay well, either in goods or money."

He shook his head. "Maybe. But it's risky."

"The tar spring isn't risky," Seville said. "Every man coming through will want to grease the wheel hubs and stock up on tar. We can claim it on squatters' rights, and who's to stop us from putting a fence around Tar Spring and making a small charge?"

He grinned at her without mirth. "There spoke a pirate's granddaughter."

She nodded. "Why, so I am. And a single woman, with a child. Our neighbors back home could surely talk about me now."

"Richie's mine," Duren shouted. "He's my child." He advanced upon her threateningly. "Do you think I'd give up my own brother's flesh and blood?"

"Emmy didn't think you would," she answered, and stood her ground until he crushed her in his arms.

He said, "Seville, Seville—I've loved you for so long and hated you for so long."

She pressed against him, giving in to his wildness, thinking suddenly of Emmy and John, lying side by side in the rock-outlined grave under the tangle of wild roses.

They wouldn't be so lonely if she and Duren and Richie lived nearby. She'd sell the farm in Maine; there was no need to go back now.

"What are you plotting now?" Duren asked jealously, and Seville smiled, a happy, contented smile.

"I was just hoping," she said. "I was hoping there'll be a preacher on the next wagon train that comes through the Sulphur. Wouldn't that be nice?"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Robert Kennedy, Efrian Garza, Charley Guinup, Gale Mower and Tommy Chavez are neither ranch cowboys nor rodeo contestants, yet they make their living riding horses (mostly quarter horses). What is their profession?

2. The Mackay Collection in the Veterans' Memorial Building at Helena, Montana consists of the work of what famous western artist?

3. What does the name "centipede" mean?

4. George Leroy Parker, grandson of a Mormon elder and sometimes called the West's greatest outlaw, was more commonly known by what name?

5. In cowboy lingo, when a puncher "squeezes the apple," what is he doing?

6. Are the horses in a roundup *remuda* usually individually named?

7. There's a Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum in Texas, a Will Rogers Monument in Colorado, a Will Rogers Memorial Museum in Oklahoma, and a Will Rogers State Park in what state?

8. Less well-known than some but still remembered for their activities either for or against the law, which two of these were outlaws, which two lawmen: Charley Siringo, Dick Fellows, Elza Lay, James B. Hume?

9. When an oldtime trail driver spoke of "a bad run," what did he mean?

10. What kind of a western bird is commonly called a blue darter?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 114. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

WOMAN OF LIBRA
SEPT. 23 to OCT. 22

ON OCTOBER 4, 1877, the Indian warriors of the Nez Percé tribe were trapped at Bear Paw, Montana, when Chief Joseph sent his message of surrender to the white camp. Under the sign of the Scales, he had weighted his winning against his losses and conceded defeat.

In the same fashion, the woman of Libra weighs the pros and cons carefully before she makes any decision. She will seldom make up her mind hastily, and she hates to be rushed for any reason. Regardless of the importance of a matter, she must take her time until she knows she is doing the right thing.

The Scales symbolize symmetry as well as justice, and this makes the Libra woman sensitive and fond of beauty, though not necessarily of luxury. She sees beauty in simple, rather than ornate things, and she is never ostentatious or flashy.

She has considerable originality and creative ability and is happiest when engaged in pursuits offering scope to her talents. Tolerant and kind, she is the first to give in during an argument, with one exception—and that is if it's a matter of good taste or esthetics, she is inclined to be adamant.

Because the Scales are also a symbol of fair play, the Libra woman is usually able to keep the peace where other women are likely to lose their tempers.

The Libra woman takes much pride in her personal appearance, and takes pleasure in being complimented on her sense of good taste and style.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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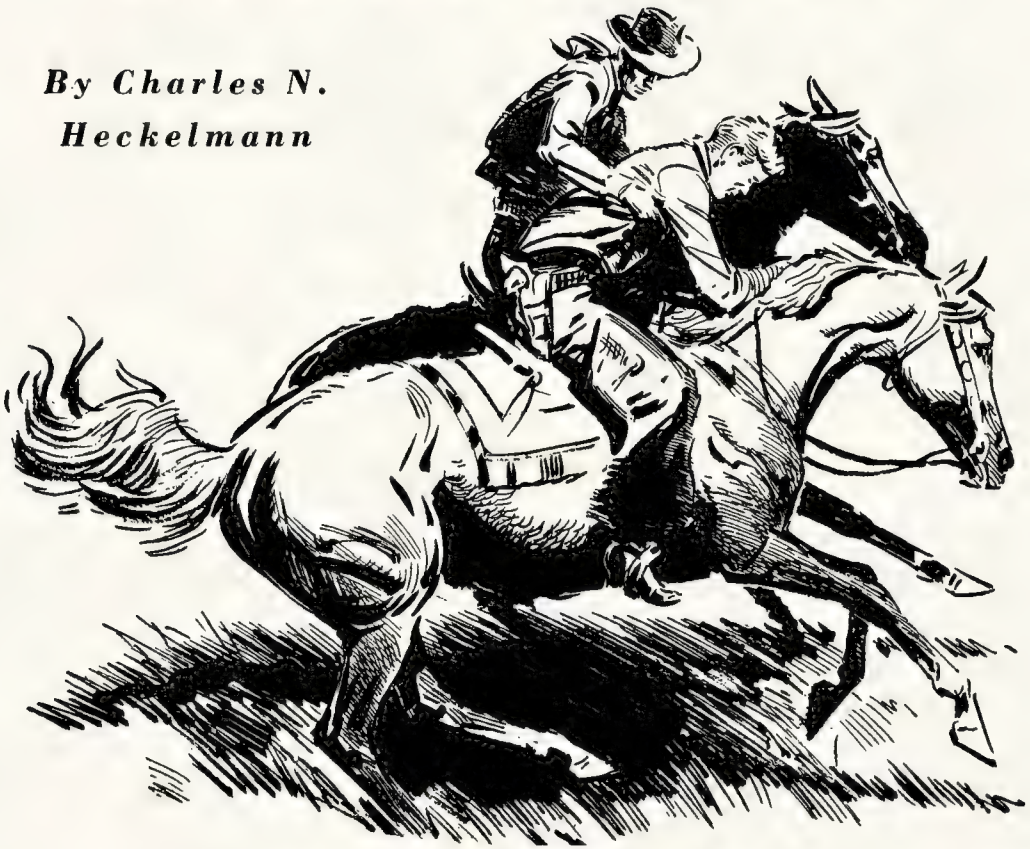
Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month..... 10-7-55

BULLET LAW

By Charles N. Heckelmann



"Tom, we'll have to split up," Steve Martin said.

THE STORY SO FAR: Fiddlefoot TOM BRACKEN returns to Hammer, his and his brother ED's ranch, and learns that Ed is involved with rustler BRAD MANTLE. Tom fires two of Mantle's men, JOE LARST and ACE MEUSEL, who are working on Hammer. Meanwhile rancher DAVE PEEK has learned that a railroad is to be built through Hammer, DALE PARRISH's Pothook, and SHERRY OLIVER's Crescent. He teams up with Mantle to rustle enough beef from Pothook, which is shaky financially, to bankrupt it so they can take over. Sherry learns about the railroad, too—accidentally—and talks her fiance, Ed, and her foreman, GEORGE BOND, into rustling from Pothook, also with the idea of taking it over. Tom's interference annoys Mantle, and Larst is sent to kill him. But Tom kills Larst instead, brings his body back to Mantle, and then has to fight his way off Mantle's ranch. Mantle runs away, but Ace Meusel is killed.

PART THREE

THE ranch buildings of Hammer were a formless black when Tom Bracken reached the yard. He pushed forward warily, a faint thread of uneasiness writhing within him. He'd instructed Steve Martin to stick around, and Martin was not the kind of rider to regard orders lightly.

The sound of the gelding's hoofs thumping the dust of the yard seemed inordinately loud in the night's stillness. Keeping one hand near his holstered gun, Bracken dismounted.

"Steve!" he called sharply.

The night gave back no answer. Bracken's

temper broke. Rashness crowded him up the steps of the veranda and on into the house. From a wall peg he took down a storm lantern. He cruised through the house, but found nothing out of the way. Then he went out into the yard. Fifty feet from the corral he found Steve Martin.

The rider lay face down in the dust. There was a dark streak of blood down his face. In the lemon-yellow light of the lantern Martin's features were the waxen image of death. But when Bracken groped inside Martin's shirt he felt the slow, firm stroke of his heart. He hurried to the bunkhouse for the pail of water on a bench there, went back and began bathing Martin's face and scalp. After a few minutes Steve stirred to life. He tried to sit up, but swayed dizzily. He stared stupidly at Tom.

"What happened here?" he asked thickly. "Get that damned wet rag out of my face."

"Take it easy. You've been creased by a slug, as far as I can see."

"Creased?" Martin stiffened. He touched the shallow furrow above his ear, stared at the blood that stained the fingertips. Suddenly he swore. "Damn it, now I remember! I was up in the barn looking over some old saddle gear when the horses in the corral set up a racket. Then I heard a muffled voice, and the clink of bit chains. I blew out the lantern, went outside, and saw three or four riders milling around the corral."

"Did you see who they were?" Bracken queried.

Martin shook his head. "Too dark," he said. "I let out a yell and started across the yard. One of the riders shouted, 'That's Martin!' They cut loose on me and knocked me out."

"By the look of that bullet crease, you didn't miss by much being knocked out for good. A half inch deeper and you'd have been boot hill bait."

Martin struggled to his feet, swayed momentarily, then regained his equilibrium. "You reckon they were after the horses?"

"I don't see why. But let's have a look."

At the corral, they made a quick count of the few horses at the far end.

"Two missing," said Martin.

"I wonder why they didn't take the whole bunch," said Bracken.

"I wish I'd gotten a glimpse of one of those riders."

"I can give a good guess where they came from," Bracken said grimly. "The BM outfit in the hills." He gave Martin a summary of the events that had brought him to Mantle's place, as well as of the fight that had followed. "Mantle's out in the open now. If it's a fight he wants, he'll get it."

Martin turned to face Bracken. "You figure on going it alone?"

"How else?" Bracken's features were gray and taciturn. "We're not likely to get any help from the other spreads, with most of them figuring us to be a maverick bunch. Where's Ed? Still in town?"

"I reckon so. You want to go after him?"

"No. This won't wait."

"It's going to be tough trailing those horses at night."

"I don't mean to trail them. I missed Mantle this afternoon. He got away while I was tangling with Meusel and the canyon guard. This time it'll be a different story."

"Okay, Tom. Count me in." Martin's eagerness showed in the strident ring of his voice. "Maybe we'd better stop off at the line camp and take Lodge and Hatten with us."

"They're hardcases, and I don't trust them," said Bracken.

"This job calls for hardcases, I'd say."

Bracken considered, then said, "You're right. If we run into Mantle's full crew we'll need more than two guns. Better saddle up two horses. That gelding of Larst's has been ridden hard today. We'll want horses with speed and bottom."

"Leave it to me," said Martin, and swung to rope out two rangy and powerful dun geldings.

ED BRACKEN arrived at the Hammer line camp at nine o'clock. He called out to Lodge and Hatten as the line shack door swung open and Lodge, gun in hand, ducked through to the yard.

"Good thing you sang out when you did," said Lodge, "or you'd be packing some lead in you. Did you see Gus Hyatt?"

"Haven't seen him in days," said Ed. "Was he up here?"

"Yeah. He brought a message that Mantle wanted to see you as soon as possible."

Ed swung down and tied his horse to a nearby sapling. "Did Gus say what Mantle wants?"

"No," replied Lodge, "but I'd say something's in the wind."

Ed laughed soundlessly.

"What's so funny?" Lodge demanded.

"Something *is* in the wind," stated Ed. "Something I don't intend Mantle even to get a smell of. I rode up here thinking you two gents might like to get in on the deal."

Interest sparked Lodge's narrow-lidded eyes. "Sure," he said, "if the price is right."

"The job is worth one hundred dollars apiece," Ed told him.

"What's the job?"

"A raid on Pothook beef."

"Mantle will raise hell if we pull off a cattle steal and don't cut him in," Hatten objected.

"So we don't tell him," snapped Ed.

Hatten said, "Just the three of us?"

"No. There'll be another gun." The sound of fast-running horses beat downwind to them. "Here's help now."

Lodge and Hatten stepped out of the lane of lamplight. Two riders came on, and when they were fifty yards away Sherry's voice carried to them.

"Ed?"

"All clear!" Ed called back.

"Damn!" growled Lodge. "That's Sherry Oliver. What's she doing up here?"

"And George Bond is with her," said Hatten. "What's your game, Ed?"

"Put that gun away," said Ed. "This is going to be all right."

Sherry and Bond drew to a halt in the shadows near the line shack. Beyond a high ridge to the west of them, a yellow half moon had appeared, riding on a low cloud bank.

"You and your men all set, Ed?" Sherry demanded, breathless from the exertion of the gallop.

"Waiting for you," he said.

"Since when has Ned Oliver gone in for night riding?" growled Lodge.

"Not Ned Oliver," Sherry contradicted, "just me and George here. This is a private party."

"You expect us to believe that?"

George Bond pushed his horse close to Lodge. "You can believe it, friend, because I say so."

Lodge dropped a hand to his gun. "Maybe you'd like to do something about it?"

Sherry reined her mare between Bond and Lodge. "There's no need to squabble among ourselves. Ed, have your men mount up, and let's be on our way." She swung her mare about, nodded to Bond, and started away from the line shack.

With the moon rising steadily in the black vault of the sky, they made swift progress across country, avoiding being outlined against the ridge top as much as possible.

It was a little past ten when they rode past the Pothook line camp and saw the distant gray-and-white shapes of cattle in a grassy swale a half mile away. There was no light in the cabin. The corral was empty.

"They have guards out," said Bond.

"I doubt if they'd have more than two men here, though," Ed said.

"Keep to the trees," Bond cautioned, cutting to the edge of the timber, but moving steadily toward the bedded-down herd.

Within a quarter mile of the cattle, Bond called a halt and they all got down. The cattle were spread out over a wide area. A lone rider came around the far side of the herd, the moving eye of his cigarette a clear guide to his progress.

"Only one man," said Lodge.

"If there's two, his pardner is probably on the other side of the meadow," said Bond.

"All right," Ed ordered, nervous and impatient now that the zero hour was at hand, "let's get the nighthawk and hit the herd."

"We'll get that guard, but we'd better see if he has a partner before we go at the beef," Bond advised. He glanced sharply at Ed Bracken. "Do you want to take the guard? I'll circle around and see if there's another man."

Ed's muscles seemed held in a frigid paralysis. Then, as he became conscious of stares, he murmured, "All right."

He shuffled to his horse, swung awkwardly aboard. Bond rode up to him. "Don't use your gun unless you have to."

Ed Bracken nodded woodenly and moved on through the fringes of the trees. He stayed in the saddle until he was just about opposite the first ring of bedded-down cows. Here he dismounted and led his horse into the trees. The Pothook rider was slowly moving in that direction.

The enforced wait gave Ed a trembling sensation in his legs, and he was suddenly short of breath. He drew his gun and crouched low. Then, as the Pothook man drifted past, Ed ran forward lightly.

He was twenty feet away when he trod upon a small dried branch. The Pothook puncher swung around, glancing toward the trees. As he saw Ed Bracken's darting shape, his hand flashed to his hip and came up flinging off gouts of red flame.

Ed felt a shocking blow in his chest. It seemed as if some vicious, unseen force had driven an iron stake into his heart. He fired, was dimly conscious of the huge dark bulk of the Pothook guard swaying out of his saddle, then heard a far-off blast of gunfire that was immediately followed by a drum of hoofs.

The next thing he knew he was on his hands and knees. There was a warm, terrifying wetness spreading along his shirt. All the energy had drained out of him, leaving him pitted and empty. The thunder of hoofs coming from the front could mean only one thing—more Pothook riders.

He wondered frantically what Sherry and the two Hammer punchers were doing in the rear. Then a great fear welled up in him. And out of that terrible dread he found the strength to rise and go at a staggering, drunken run back toward his horse. It wasn't far, but his mount seemed to have vanished.

He ran until his chest was on fire, and the ground tilted toward his face, and the heavens with the moon and the glittering wash of stars spun in a crazy arc all around him. Again there was a blow—a blow he felt all the length of his body. He knew, then, that he had fallen. He knew, too, that he had to get up again, had to go on running. His brain beat out the frantic message of command to his muscles. But the spark that gave them life was fading fast, and he lay there with only his hands feebly scratching at the hoof-churned earth.

TOM BRACKEN and Steve Martin were traversing a raised saddle of grassy earth, high above the Hammer line camp, when they saw the light in the log shack blink out.

"Lodge and Hatten are hitting their bunks, I reckon," Martin observed.

"We'll roust them out quick enough," said Bracken, and sent his gelding sliding down the steep slant from the ridge top.

Below, the aspens gave way to pines, and the humus of dead leaves and pine needles muffled their horses' hoofbeats. Suddenly they heard the clatter of riders on the trail below them.

"Four or five horses, I'd say," murmured Bracken. "I'd like to get a look at them."

"Let's follow them," Martin said.

"I want a look at the line camp first."

When they reached the shack, they found it empty. So were the corral and the lean-to barn.

"That means they were riding with that bunch we just spotted," Bracken said, as he hoisted himself into his saddle. "Now we'll see where they're headed."

Along the trail, the smell of dust from the passage of the other party was still clear and distinct.

"What do you suppose is going on?" Martin queried, as they jogged up a steep, wooded slant.

"Whatever it is, you can bet it means trouble for Hammer," Bracken replied. "I tabbed those two line riders for outlaws or ridge runners when I first met them this morning. It wouldn't surprise me if they're drawing pay from Mantle."

Bracken and Martin had no difficulty in pursuing their quarry. The riders ahead were making no effort at concealment. On one or two occasions they were skylined in the bright moonlight as they topped a ridge or high bench.

They had been traveling for twenty minutes when Bracken murmured, "Looks as if

they're angling toward Pothook range."

"Dale's running a big herd of beef up near Winchester Pass," Martin answered. "The way we're headed now we'll barge smack into the critters."

A foreshadowing of violence washed over Bracken's mind. His features turned grave and heavy. "Something's going to break tonight, Steve," he said.

A vigorous slash of his arm sent them both forward at a dead run for ten minutes. When they slowed down they were only a short distance from the upper pasture used by Pothook late in the summer.

A dry wash lay before them and they dipped into it, the horses clattering across the pebble-strewn bottom, then clambering up the sharp shelf on the far side. As they went over the lip the harsh, flat beat of gunfire was carried downwind to them. There were three shots, spaced almost together.

Bracken spurred his horse into a run, crashing through trees. Martin fed steel to the flanks of his own gelding as they tore through a half-mile stretch of timber, their nerves keyed and straining to catch the sound of guns.

They were almost out of the trees when Martin said, "What were those shots? A signal?"

Bracken didn't answer. He heard the muted bawling of cattle, the sound rising in volume as they emerged into the broad meadow that made a lush green swath beyond Winchester Pass. There was a great mass of bedded-down cows—some now beginning to stir uneasily—directly before Martin and Bracken as they hit the swale at a headlong gallop.

Then the sight of a riderless horse close to the edge of the herd made Bracken switch direction. But before he got close to the horse that had first attracted his attention, he saw the sprawled figure of a man closer at hand. In the harsh, white glare of moonlight there was something frighteningly familiar about that huddled form.

Bracken pulled his dun gelding to a halt, leaped to the ground. He went at a hobbling, awkward run and hunkered down beside the motionless figure on the ground.

"Ed!" said Tom, with a fierce urgency. He turned his brother over on his back, felt a frigid lump in his chest solidify when he saw the ugly, bleeding wound that was sucking the life out of Ed. "What happened?"

A tremendous shudder wracked Ed. The weighted eyelids flickered open, but Ed's dark blue eyes, though they held brief recognition, were taking on the sightless glare that presaged death.

"Tom!" Tom had to bend down close to Ed's lips to catch the whisper. "My—my fault. I've made—a—mess of things."

"Who was it?" demanded Tom. "Who shot you? What's it all about?"

Ed's head moved slowly from side to side. "Not—not important about me," he said in a choking gasp. "I'm riding out."

"You'll be all right," Tom said savagely, as if by the very vigor of his voice he could make it so.

A meager smile tugged at Ed's pale lips. A great bubble of blood welled from his mouth and gushed over his shirt. The glaze over his eyes became more pronounced. "Get Mantle." The words were a husky rasp almost lost in the racking cough that ravaged his body. "Mantle . . . Peek."

There was a devastating shudder, then Ed went limp.

Martin said, "Gone?"

"Yeah." Tom Bracken's face was bleak, and his eyes had gone dead. He remained crouched over Ed, one arm braced under Ed's shoulder, while a feeling of utter desolation and futility rolled over him.

"Riders coming this way!" Martin leaped to his horse.

Tom slid his arm free and rose to his feet. But everything he did now was in slow motion. All of his muscles were tardy in obeying the action impulses of his brain. He saw horsemen bearing down on him. He saw Martin's horse rearing and pawing at the air, saw the glint of moonlight on Martin's raised gun. He heard the crash of a shot and a riotous clamor of voices that seemed to swell all around him.

HIS own gun was in his hand as a .45 slug drilled into the earth at his feet and Buck Wykel's shrill yell knifed into his consciousness.

"Drop your piece, Bracken, or I'll blast you down!"

Tom lowered his arm and lifted his head, to see Wykel and Dale Parrish gallop up in the vanguard of a tight group of Pothook punchers.

"Let it go, Tom," Dale Parrish said, and then her head swung toward Steve Martin, tense and uncertain in his saddle. "You, too, Steve. You haven't a chance."

Martin flung his gun down, his features tight and angry. After a moment Tom let his revolver fall.

"This time we've got you dead to rights, Bracken," Wykel said, swinging down from his horse.

"You got Ed, too, I see," Tom murmured.

"The damned sneak got one of our nighthawks," Wykel said.

"How do you know?"

"We were on our way up here when we heard shooting break out. Dale has been uneasy about leaving all these cattle so far up in the hills. We figured on camping at the line shack tonight and starting the critters back to the lower meadows after dawn. There were only three shots. Jandro, one of our riders, is down yonder with a slug in him, and here's your brother full of lead. Do I need to draw up a picture?"

A long, weary sigh broke from Bracken. He looked past the Pothook foreman to Dale Parrish. "It's not like it seems, Dale."

Dale's mobile features were white and drawn. "Then how is it?" she asked in a resigned, hopeless tone.

Wykel broke in angrily, "Dale, you're not going to listen to any more of this jigger's stories!"

"Wait," she said. "I want to hear. Go ahead, Tom."

"A lot has happened," he said. "I found out that Joe Larst and Ace Meusel were the ones who jumped me in town." He told of his arrival at Hammer, of his fight with Larst, and of his orders to both riders to clear off. "This afternoon," he added doggedly, "Larst ambushed me. He took several shots at me, but after circling around through the brush, I nailed him. His horse was carrying the BM brand. I put Larst's body on the horse and took him to Mantle's place."

A sudden spark of feeling brought color to Dale's cheeks. "Tom, what made you go there?"

"Damn it, Dale, don't believe him!" said Wykel. "He's just trying to talk his way out of trouble."

"Go on, Tom," Dale said firmly.

"I was crazy mad," Bracken told her. "Larst and Meusel had been working for Mantle all the while they'd been drawing wages from Hammer. Mantle admitted ordering them to give me a beating as a warning to stay out of Loreno. After that he had to play his hand all the way."

Dale's hand moved involuntarily to her throat. "You mean he tried to kill you?"

"Exactly."

Wykel snorted in derision. "And you shot your way out of that, too?"

"Believe it or not, I did," replied Bracken. "Mantle was alone on the place with Meusel. He told Meusel to take me, but I tipped the table over on Mantle and in the scramble I got my hands on his Colt." Quickly he sketched the details.

"This gets better and better," Wykel sneered. "Maybe you have an explanation for being on Pothook range in the dead of night."

"If it means anything, I have," Bracken said wearily. "When I got back to Hammer tonight I found Martin knocked out by a forty-five slug, and two of our horses gone. Steve didn't get a look at the raiders, but I figured it was Mantle."

"Trying to draw you into a trap!" said Dale. Her anger had now become concern.

"I couldn't think of anything then but settling with Mantle," Bracken said. "I took Steve along, planning to pick up the two riders at our line camp, and then hit the BM. On the way we saw five riders going along the trail from the camp. After making sure that the cabin was empty, we followed the riders. When we got close to the meadow here we heard three shots. That's all. We rode out toward the herd, and I found Ed dying."

"What do you figure he was doing up here?" Wykel demanded.

"I don't know."

Wykel's heavy brows drew together. "I'll

tell you what he was doing," he said furiously. "He and his friends were after Pothook beef tonight. His job was to gun down Jandro, our nighthawk. But your brother messed things up, and got killed for his pains. The rest of his coyote bunch of Hammer hardcases took to their heels."

"You may be right about Ed," Bracken admitted, his face stony with grief and fatigue. "He had no legitimate business here. But Hammer—"

"That's enough!" shouted Wykel. "We should have ridden against Hammer the day Linus caught Gurdon, your brother's ranny, with those stolen cows. Your outfit was rustling then, and your buckos are still at it—with Mantle giving you help when needed."

"Why would Mantle put Larst and Meusel on Tom's trail if they were working together?" protested Dale.

"Use your head, Dale," Wykel grunted. "All we have is Tom Bracken's word. I don't believe a damned thing he's said. We have all the evidence we need right here to show us the Brackens were set to run off our herd." He turned in the saddle and spoke to Cooney. "Give me your rope, Slate. There's only one way to handle this."

"No, Slate!" Dale cried, struggling with the puncher as he freed his lariat from the saddle horn. "You can't hang Tom. I won't let you!"

The Pothook foreman shoved his gelding against Dale's mare, then ripped her revolver out of her holster and flung it away. He got a grip on her arms and hauled her away from Cooney. Dale fought him furiously with fists and nails.

"Darby! Marks!" Wykel yelled. "Get over here pronto."

Two riders pushed close to the ramrod. Wykel said. "Take Miss Dale back to the ranch."

"Buck, you can't do this!" Dale screamed, fighting to break clear from the tangle of men and horses. "This is my ranch, and don't you forget it!"

WYKEL, taking another slashing blow on the face, gave her a savage grin and pinned her arms against her body. "That's right," he said. "I work here, and you're the owner. But your daddy told me before he died that I could use my judgment in running the spread. And I'm going to start right now!"

"You're fired!" Dale cried.

"You can't fire me," Wykel said. "Your dad told me I had a job here as long as I wanted to stay, and you heard him say it. Get her out of here, boys, and if she won't go, hogtie her to her saddle. The rest of you get back to the cattle in the meadow. Cooney and I can handle these two coots."

"Tom," Dale cried, "don't let them do it! Run for it!"

Wykel spat in the dust. "Dale, get out of here. I'm doing this my way. You and no one else can stop me. I'm going to clean out the range scum."

Cooney seemed a little worried. "You sure you want to do this, Buck? Why not call in the sheriff from Mill Creek?"

"This is Pothook trouble, and we can handle it without help from the law. That big aspen over near the edge of the meadow—" Wykel gestured to Bracken and Martin—"turn your horses around and head for it."

A prickly sensation of coldness washed over Bracken. All of his nerves were strung out tight and fine. "You're making a mistake, Buck." His voice sounded as if he'd been running up a steep hill and was out of breath.

"I'll worry about that after you're hung," said Wykel.

The cavalcade moved across the meadow to the aspen the Pothook ramrod had designated. A big branch extended from the tree's trunk above their heads.

"This will do," said Wykel.

Throwing one end of the rope over the limb, he caught the free end and deftly fashioned a noose in it. Then brush crackled behind him and Sherry Oliver's voice reached him in a fierce, ringing cry.

"Take your hands off that rope, Wykel!"

Sherry and George Bond rode out of the trees with guns in their hands. The puncher beside Cooney started to swing his Colt around, but saw Bond's gun barrel centered on his chest. The flat, hard stare in the Crescent foreman's eyes was a warning.

"Stay out of this, Sherry," Wykel said. "This is Pothook business. We have a rustler to hang."

"I'm making it my business," Sherry snapped. "Tom, they'll have to kill me first before they put a rope around your neck. Go on, ride, both of you. George and I will hold them off."

Bracken picked up his reins. "Thanks, Sherry," he said, and spurred away with Martin.

A sudden wicked suspicion squeezed Bond's eyelids to narrow slits. The bright shine of fear in Sherry's eyes, her complete absorption in Bracken's flight, was a sickening revelation that drove him berserk.

"Damn you, Sherry!"

Her frienzied shout to Bracken drowned out Bond's voice. "Tom! Remember the cave, Tom, darling!"

Bond whirled on Sherry, and his voice beat against her in an ugly diapason of outrage. "You don't give a damn about Ed Bracken lying dead, or me, or anyone else! It's Tom you really hanker for. I should have known. You got me pretty cheap, for just a couple of kisses. Well, you can have Tom—with a bullet in him!"

The long-barreled Colt in his fist sang a deadly tune. Sherry screamed. She spurred toward Bond as he squeezed off a second shot at Bracken's fleeing figure. When Bracken lurched and slumped forward in the saddle, stricken horror distended Sherry's eyes.

But somehow Bracken managed to cling desperately to the neck of his speeding horse, and was soon out of sight in the trees.

"George, I'll kill you for that!" Sherry raged, swinging her .38 toward his head.

Bond ducked, but the barrel struck his shoulder. Sherry fired at him, but missed.

"Sherry!" he yelled. "Watch the others!"

But Sherry was past caring about Wykel, Cooney, or any of the Pothook hands, hysterically intent on destroying Bond. Before

[*Turn page*]

ADVERTISEMENT

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

Forty-three years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young journalist named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change come over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Forty-three years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back home to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his liftime of travel throughout the world. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power, which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 43 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this magazine a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation to sincere readers of this notice. In addition he will give to each of them a 64-page book showing the astonishing events the world may soon expect, according to great prophecies.

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she could fire again, however, Wykel drove his horse against her mare. The edge of his hand slashed down on her wrist.

Behind her there was an exchange of shots. By the time she had neck-reined the mare around, George Bond was toppling out of his saddle and Slate Cooney was staring down the length of his Colt at the fallen ramrod.

Wykel roared at Cooney, "You fool! Why did you shoot him?"

"I couldn't help myself, Buck," Cooney muttered. "When you headed for Sherry, Bond leveled at me, so I had to let him have it."

Hoof thunder was coming across the meadow from the direction of the bedded-down cattle herd. Four riders were sweeping toward them. They came up with a jangling of bit chains, and the foreman yelled, "What's up, Buck?"

"Plenty! Tom Bracken and Steve Martin got away, and Bond is dead."

"How did it happen?"

"No time for explanations. We're going after Bracken and Martin. You, Temple, get Bond on his horse and ride back to Crescent with Sherry."

He looked at Sherry, but all the fight had gone out of the girl. She sat hunched over in the saddle, dry-eyed, but broken in spirit. Wykel drove his voice at Cooney and the rest of the crew.

"Let's ride!"

IT WAS well after dark when Gus Hyatt and the two hardcases he had taken with him, Tut Rivers and Guy Salinas, pulled in to the BM ranch yard. Rivers and Salinas were each leading a Hammer-branded cow pony.

The buckboard was drawn up in front of the bar. A brace of storm lanterns stood in the dust, and another hardcase named Gregg Forrest was pulling shovels out of the wagon bed. Brad Mantle stood beside it.

"What are you doing with the shovels, Brad?" Hyatt asked.

Mantle's hatchet face swiveled around. "We just finished burying Meusel and Crowder."

"The he'l you say!" Amazement drove Hyatt's voice to a high, unnatural pitch. "What happened?"

"Every damn thing," replied Mantle. "Tom Bracken rode in here with Joe Larst's dead body across his saddle. Joe messed up his ambush attempt and Bracken got him. Bracken came in to read us the riot act about rustling. I told Meusel to take him, but Ace missed his shot and Bracken dumped a table over me, stunning me long enough to get my gun and finish off Meusel. I went out the side window to the barn to get an extra gun but Bracken got away. Later, I found he'd shot Crowder, up at the pass."

Hyatt never questioned the veracity of Mantle's story. It sounded plausible enough. But a nagging edge of worry grew in Hyatt. "Bracken can make plenty of trouble for us, Brad, if he starts talking."

Mantle cut him off. "He has nothing to talk about. All he knows positively is that Larst and Meusel beat him up in an alley in town."

"Yeah, but they were working for Hammer, and when he fired them they ran right here." Hyatt's thin lips closed tightly together. "He's got to be taken, Brad."

"He will be," said Mantle. He swung around to the BM crew. "I want Bracken dead. I'll give two hundred dollars to the man who shoots him."

"How about going after him tonight?" Hyatt asked eagerly.

"We have a cattle grab on for tonight, and I'll want everyone along," said Mantle. "Rustle up some grub for yourselves and then we'll head for Pothook."

Within twenty minutes the BM crew was in saddle. They were still several miles from Pothook's northern meadows when the brisk night wind carried the faint whip crack of two gunshots to their ears. Mantle waved the group on at a gallop. Guns were loosened in holsters, and vigilance sharpened all their senses.

By the time they reached the last rim of trees fringing the meadows' boundary, Ed Bracken and the Pothook nighthawk were down, and Tom and Martin stood over Ed's sprawled shape.

From their vantage point, Mantle and his crew had a bull's-eye view of the swift panorama of events that followed. As Dale Parrish, Buck Wykel and the Pothook rannies surrounded Tom Bracken and Steve Martin, and voices were raised in angry shouts, the entire picture was made immediately clear.

"Well, Ed is taken care of, at least," observed Hyatt. "I wonder what he was doing up here?"

"The sign is plain," snapped Mantle. "He was planning a rustling job on his own."

"The damned fool," said Hyatt.

"He's better off dead." Mantle was watching Wykel make his bid to hang Tom and Martin. Suddenly he chuckled. "You boys are out two hundred dollars if Wykel gets a rope around Bracken's throat."

Hyatt's only answer was a vicious oath.

The sudden appearance of Sherry Oliver and George Bond brought Mantle to stiff attention. "What the hell!" he said. "Looks like meeting night for the Loreno cowmen."

The BM crew was bewildered. And the rush and confusion of action that ensued left them even more perplexed. As Tom and Steve Martin dashed away, Mantle had to restrain Hyatt from grabbing his Winchester from the saddle scabbard.

"I'll get that son right now!" Hyatt growled.

"And pull Pothook down on us? We'll sit tight."

Mantle's hardcases waited in the brush while Wykel's crew hit the trail after the two fugitives. When all sound of their pursuit had dwindled away, Mantle came out of cover, and surveyed the meadow and the nervously stirring cattle.

"We're playing in luck tonight, Gus," Mantle said. "With only a couple of men guarding the cattle, they're just asking to be stolen."

"Do we take the Hammer broomtails along?"

"No. They're no good to us now. We'll just have to be sure we get those Pothook riders."

[*Turn page*]

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THE shock of the heavy bullet hitting Tom Bracken in the soft flesh below the ribs on his left side was like the thrust of hot steel. Numbness surged over him in a paralyzing tide. The reins slid from his fingers. The ground seemed to rise up to meet him. Then, miraculously, the paralysis left him, and his groping hands fastened on the gelding's mane.

Martin shouted, "Where're you hit?"

"The side. I—I'll be all right. Keep going!"

They galloped across the meadow, while a wild clamor rose behind them. At last the trees swallowed them up. Each lunge of Bracken's horse aggravated his agony, but he set his teeth and strove to keep close to Martin, as behind them came the clatter of pursuit. Wykel had put Pothook on their trail!

Emerging from the trees, Bracken and Martin followed a rocky bench for a half mile, then dipped into a dry wash. They were a mile and a half along the barranca when they heard Wykel's party swing into the stream bed. Martin twisted in the saddle and saw that Bracken was beginning to lag behind.

"Go on!" Bracken urged. "I'm all right."

Martin said, "We have to get you off your horse so that wound can be attended to."

"No time to stop now, Steve," Bracken murmured weakly. "Got to keep running."

They galloped on for another half mile, side by side, Martin watching Bracken with anxious eyes. Bracken was swaying now. No effort of will was sufficient to dispel the encroaching wave of impotence that seemed to start at his ankles and creep inexorably up his limbs to his belly and chest and arms. His body was suddenly light and airborne. Martin's voice reached him as from a great distance.

"Tom, we'll have to split up." There was a fierce urgency in Martin's words. "You can hole up somewhere in the trees. I'll lead them a chase into the hills, then try to circle back."

"No," said Bracken doggedly. "That would be too much risk for you."

"There's no other way!" Martin yelled. "Cut out of this wash and head for those trees yonder."

He slashed at Bracken's gelding with his reins, deliberately crowded Bracken's horse toward the shelving bank. There was a clatter of loose stones. Then Bracken was out of the wash and into the trees.

Martin sank his spurs into the flanks of his own horse and rushed off around another wide-swinging curve of the gravely ravine. Only when he was certain that Wykel's crew had ridden past the point where Bracken had left the wash did he make any attempt to throw off pursuit. Urging his horse to its utmost speed then, he clattered on.

Bracken, meanwhile, rode blindly through the trees after he left the stream bed. The gelding had to fight through a maze of vines and buckbrush and fallen saplings. Bracken was only vaguely aware of the Pothook riders going by a few hundred yards behind him. The noise beat against his ears like muted thunder, then quickly waned and died.

He knew he had to put as much distance as possible between the Pothook party and himself, yet his senses were too muddled to transmit the wish into action. And so he remained passive as the horse pressed on through the thicket.

Two miles went by, but Bracken had lost all awareness of his surroundings. He was adrift in a dizzying whirl of jolting motion. Finally, at the border of a small park in the midst of a stand of tall pines, the gelding stopped. Bracken swayed out of the saddle and fell to the soft carpet of pine needles.

He was stiff and cold when he returned to his senses. For a minute or two he could not orient himself. Then he saw that he was in a small clearing guarded by trees, and his horse was grazing nearby. The sudden twinge of pain in his side brought memory surging back.

From the moon's position he judged that he had passed out only for a brief time. However, he realized he could not risk staying where he was. If the Pothook rider caught up with Martin, they'd double back to scour this area completely.

Pulling his shirt and his thick undershirt

away from his wound, his probing fingers discovered a narrow gash where the bullet had entered in the back, and a wider hole where it had passed out again. Though the pain was intense, he was thankful he was not carrying a slug.

With the need to move on nagging at his nerves, he tore a wide strip from the undershirt, folded it into a pad, and tucked it against the twin-edged wound. With several more strips he bound the pad to his side.

The pain became a lacerating infliction of burning agony when he boosted himself back into the saddle. He sat loosely, the cold sweat of his exertions making a sharp stinging on his face and neck as he sent the gelding across the clearing. He had no definite destination in mind. It was imperative only that he push higher into the Tumurals, where pursuit would be difficult.

Once out of the trees, he kept traveling for an hour, fighting fatigue and pain every mile of the way. Finally, when he found it almost impossible to maintain his seat in the saddle, he halted in another grove of pines. By sheer will power he off-saddled and picketed the gelding. Then he rolled up in the saddle blanket and fell instantly into a drugged, dreamless sleep.

GRAY dawn mists covered the green-clad slopes all around him when he awoke, stiff and sore. A damp chill had penetrated to his bones. The thought of hot coffee came as a torment to him, for he had no food of any kind with him.

Going down to the nearby brook, he gulped a few mouthfuls of water and scrubbed at his face with his hands. He wiped a shirt-sleeved arm across his dripping cheeks to dry them, then quickly cinched the saddle on the gelding and went through the distressing ritual of mounting.

He guided the gelding toward the brook, and followed the stream northward all morning. with the sun's heat growing stronger by the hour, and the bits of hunger gnawing in his vitals. He had no way even of bagging

[*Turn page*]

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any game, lacking a rifle or a handgun.

More important than food or any other consideration, though became his urgent need for rest. He remembered, then, Sherry's frantic call to him when he and Martin had fled from the scene of the proposed hanging. She had said something about a "cave." Now it come to him what she had meant.

The cave was a wide, deep fault in a ledge of rock high in the Tumurals, a desolate place. He had stumbled on the cave while on an antelope hunt with Ed. Because he had been struck by the rugged beauty of this high country, he had, at different times, brought Dale and Sherry to see the cave. For a man on the dodge it would make a perfect sanctuary.

A little past noon, when he off-saddled to rest and to give the gelding a breather, he saw two separate parties of riders in the lower hills. In one group he made out at least ten riders, and in the other about six or seven. That meant that Pothook had been joined by other outfits. Had all of them fallen into line?

There was Dave Peek to consider, too. Peek's name had been the last to come from Ed's dying lips. And, though it was painful to admit, Tom told himself that his brother had been a rustler. But who had he been working with? Brad Mantle was the likely choice, yet no other riders had appeared on the scene.

And the five riders he and Martin had followed from the Hammer line camp—two of them Lodge and Hatten, he was certain—what had happened to them? And Ed's mention of Peek's name. Had the Lazy Link owner, rather than Mantle, been tied up with Ed's strange activities of the previous night?

Now Tom Bracken's own life was in jeopardy. His back was to the wall. Nowhere in this suddenly hostile country was there a man he could call friend. If Steve Martin had been captured he was really alone, without even a gun with which to defend himself.

He remounted and rode deeper into the hills. At three o'clock he came to the lightning-riven pine tree that marked the slanting upgrade leading to the cave. Arching into the sky was a high granite bluff, and fifty feet up its first gradient, hidden by brush, was the cave. Hurriedly he pushed the gelding into the narrow, winding trail.

Three hundred yards from the sentinel pine, he left the trail and dismounted, leading the gelding up the slope. He pushed through the thicket into the cool, shadowy interior of a twelve-foot vault of rock.

In almost frantic haste, he off-sanddled. He was unutterably weary, and the void in his stomach was now torture. Fatigue, however, overcame his other bodily needs, and he fell asleep—only to be brought frighteningly awake, at dusk, by the faint crackle of gunfire.

DALE PARRISH was in the midst of a cheerless breakfast when the weary Pothook crew rode into the yard. She hurried out. Wykel was shouting orders for fresh horses.

"You didn't catch up with Tom?" Dale said to the Pothook foreman, who regarded her dourly as he wiped sweat and grime from his face.

"No," Wykel admitted, "but the hunt is just beginning, as far as I'm concerned."

"Buck, if you think Tom's guilty of rustling, he must be allowed to stand trial."

Wykel stepped close. "I've been a cowman all my life, in Texas and Montana and Wyoming, and I've never had to let a sheriff or a marshal do my work for me. I don't intend to start now. I'm going to get Bracken, and I'll give him a chance to talk, but God help him if he doesn't give the right answers."

"I can guess how much of a chance that will be," Dale said. Wykel turned his back deliberately, and shouted at the crew, "Hurry with those ponies. We're due to meet Crescent, and Dave Peek's crowd, in an hour."

Dale walked up to Wykel and swung him around. Her face was livid with anger. "So you've pulled them into it."

"That's right," he snapped.

Dale swung around and lifted her voice to the crew. "Any man who rides with Buck in the posse can consider himself fired right now!"

BULLET LAW

"Wait a minute, Dale," said Slate Cooney. "You can't do that."

"I'll do as I please, thank you," Dale countered, "as long as I own Pothook." Her angry eyes raked every puncher in the group. "Make up your minds. If you ride with Buck, you're through!"

There was a nervous scuffling of feet as the men looked at one another and then at Wykel.

"Gosh, Buck," one of them said, "it isn't easy to pick up good ranching jobs these days."

"Suit yourself," said Wykel. "Those of you who mean to ride with me, come along."

Slate Cooney and two other men decided to stick with Dale. That left four men to ride with Wykel when he kicked his horse into a run and led them out of the yard.

An hour later a dusty, bedraggled rider named Tucson drove a sweat-streaked, spur-roweled horse up to the Pothook barn and almost fell out of the saddle, because of a bullet in his shoulder and another in his side. Tucson had been one of the two punchers detailed to guard the Pothook cattle in the hills when Wykel went in pursuit of Bracken and Martin.

Carried to his bunk, Tucson blurted out a confused story of a cattle raid when a bunch of riders had struck, fifteen minutes after Wykel's group had left the meadow. Tucson's partner had been shot down in the first volley. Tucson himself had been downed and had lain unconscious all night. This morning he had managed to get on his horse and ride back to headquarters.

Dale, who had dispatched a rider for the doctor, and was hovering over Tucson, instantly cried, "Slate, that raid proves Tom was not a party to the rustling!"

Cooney shook his head. "It could have been the bunch Tom was with before we came up."

"You mean they would have waited, running the chance of having Tom hung or shot? It doesn't make sense. Did you get a look at any of the riders, Tucson?"

"No," he said. "It happened too fast."

Dale glanced sharply at Cooney. "Slate, Brad Mantle is behind that raid! Take the crew and ride up to the meadow and see if

[*Turn page*]

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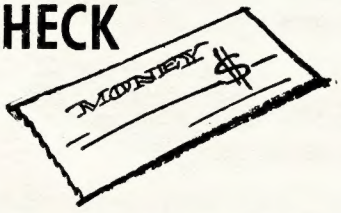

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you can pick up the trail. I want those cattle back. I'm going to Crescent and Lazy Link to leave word what's happened."

She reached Crescent too late, however, to intercept Ned Oliver's contingent of riders. As she started to turn away, Sherry rode out of the barn on a sorrel mare. She had a haggard, worried look. She seemed anxious, too, to get away.

"Was there anything special you wanted to see me about, Dale?" she asked, in a hard, remote fashion.

"I was worried about Tom," Dale said. The fire and spirit had gone out of her. "And now with the raid on our cattle, after Tom got away from Wykel—that proves Tom's innocence!"

Sherry gave a start of surprise. "What are you talking about?"

Dale told her, adding, "Now I'm going after Wykel and your father to try to talk some sense into them." A faint wildness touched her eyes. "Mantle's the man they should be hunting, not Tom. Where are *you* going?"

"None of your business!"

Dale kicked her mount forward, her gray eyes intense. "If you know where Tom is, tell me," she said fiercely.

"I don't know," snapped Sherry. "But if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Let's face it, Dale. We both want him. Let's see who gets him?" She dug her heels into the sorrel mare and galloped away.

Dale, her suspicions roused by Sherry's talk and her apparent eagerness to get away, decided to follow. At first Sherry seemed to be heading for the hills, but after covering three miles at a fast canter, she turned into the main wagon road, toward town. Dale paused at the fork, wondering if Sherry might conceivably have some idea where Tom could be. She finally decided that Sherry had only had an obscure desire to hurt her.

Morosely Dale turned back, cutting up a steep, wooded slope which terminated in a rocky bench. Once she reached the bench it was a five-mile ride across rolling country to Dave Peek's Lazy Link Ranch.

She was out of sight of the wagon road when Sherry, who had seen Dale leave the main trail, swung her sorrel into the brush and rode back in the direction from which she had just come.

A grim smile touched her lips briefly, before the hard urgency in her made her whip her mare into a crashing run.

(To be concluded in the next issue.)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 98)

1. They're jockeys.
2. Charley Russell.
3. Having 100 feet.
4. Butch Cassidy.
5. Hanging on to the saddle horn.
6. Yes, almost always.
7. California.
8. Charley Siringo and James B. Hume were on the side of the law. Dick Fellows and Elza Lay were outlaws.
9. A stampede.
10. A bluish gray chicken hawk, the gosshawk.

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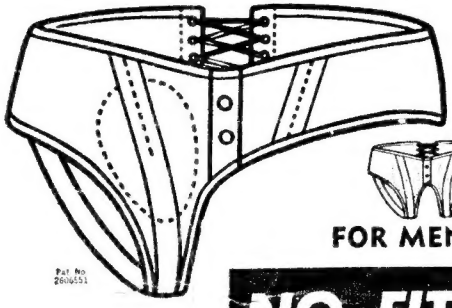

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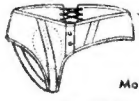

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I'll be happy to send you without you paying a penny, this lovable, young, miniature DOG that is so tiny you can carry it in your pocket or hold it in one hand, yet it barks and is a reliable watch dog as well as a pet. You can keep it in a shoe box and enjoy many amusing hours teaching it tricks . . . active, healthy, intelligent and clean. Simply hand out only 20 get-acquainted coupons to friends and relatives to help us get that many new customers as per our premium letter. I enjoy my own lively, tiny dog so much. It is such wonderful company that I'm sure you'll simply love one yourself.

Miniature Dogs Are Intelligent — Easy to Teach Tricks.

Please send me your favorite snapshot, photo or Kodak picture when writing for your Miniature Dog. We will make you a beautiful 5x7 inch enlargement in a handsome "Movietone" frame SO YOU CAN TELL YOUR FRIENDS about our bargain hand-colored enlargements when handing out the get-acquainted coupons. Just mail me your favorite snapshot, print or negative NOW and pay the postman only 19c plus postage when your treasured enlargement arrives and I'll include the "Movietone" frame at no extra cost. LIMIT of 2 to any one person. Your original returned with your enlargement and frame. **Also include the COLOR OF HAIR AND EYES** with each picture, so I can also give you our bargain offer on a second enlargement artfully hand colored in oils for natural beauty, sparkle and life, like we have done for thousands of others.

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MRS. RUTH LONG
DEAN STUDIOS, DEPT. X-422
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Enclosed find.....snapshots or negatives for enlarging. (Limit of two.)

Color Eyes.....	Color Eyes.....
Color Hair.....	Color Hair.....

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

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